we wear the mask that grins and lies, (-it hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—)

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by llamallamaduck

Summary

Itachi Uchiha, officially known as Sirius Black, leaves his brother yet again. It seems kin-slaying has somewhat predictable consequences. Honestly, who thought sending a traumatized Shinobi to Hogwarts was a good idea?

Chapter 1: Introduction

Itachi, the Heir of the Ancient and Noble House of Black is hiding in the luggage compartment.

No, really, like an imbecile. All the way in the back, up on the shelf, a little to the right. The trunks are stacked magically, but whatever spell—or invisible elf—directs where what goes, they allow Itachi his oasis. Technically his trunk—shrunk and dangling from his arm—would occupy the same space Itachi occupies now, so. It's fair.

The reasons for his ignoble decision are many and varied. The main reason, naturally, is that in about one hour, he will be attending his first semester at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Well, no. The main reason is that everyone and their grand-niece thinks Itachi—Sirius, but who's counting—is either crippled by his father or a murderous lunatic in his own right. Well, no. The *main* reason is that Itachi has spoken to perhaps three children in this life, and would like to continue this trend as long as he is able.

Well, no.

Regulus didn't want to talk to him. Somehow, Itachi has managed to not repeat a single mistake of his first life, and still end up with more or less the same result.

Regulus didn't speak to him, other than to rip into him with force and viciousness that would make their fucking mother proud. That honestly made Itachi proud, even if it sent him arse over kunai into a panic attack.

So—he hides. There are children on this train he needs to speak to. Frank fucking Longbottom is one such child. Aunt Dorea's baby Potter is another. Cousin Narcissa lurks somewhere too, even if she is, according to everything he'd heard, the least interesting Black of the lot.

Failing that, there are two other Ancient and Noble Heirs. Both are less significant than House of Black, but still. House Shafiq sent their Heiress and house Morgan their Heir, both

of them in Itachi's year.

All sorts of politicking needs to happen. Is expected of him, even. It's more or less why he's here.

Well. It's exactly why he's *here*, lumped into the Sage-forsaken shelf like a bag of onions. More broadly, it's why he's here in Hogwarts Express. Hogwarts. Politicking is why he is the Heir, why he is allowed all the freedoms he's been given, and why none of those freedoms could have kept him home with his brother.

Politicking, in short, is what Sirius Black was born to do.

Itachi Uchiha, on the other hand, was born to murder the enemies of his family brutally and without pause. Which is not as dissimilar to the first as it might appear, but dissimilar enough to confuse. Itachi wasn't made to think, to discern, to know strategy.

That, he muses morosely, as he huddles into his cloak, is rather the point. Itachi was taught tactics but not strategy, which fucked everything up gloriously. Sirius was taught strategy but not tactics, which managed to do the same.

Between his two lives, he really should have had the complete set of instructions. Apparently not. Apparently, there is something still missing. A whole lot more, in fact, since where before he had a whole Clan, a village and a dictator to keep happy, now he only had Regulus. Only one person.

And he failed.

The one-track nature of his mind would be amusing if it wasn't as shameless as it was. Even now, when Regulus should be way back on his list of concerns, he has somehow snagged the first spot. The boy is happy, unharmed, living in the lap of luxury, the beloved son of the wealthiest Family in Britain.

Whereas Itachi is heading into a school led by a notoriously Light, and ruthless Headmaster. The papers have been stringing him up and down for days, and it will only get worse from there. His father tortured him a hairsbreadth from insanity, and healing took so much out of him, that he is forbidden to do any magic for three weeks. He has somehow promised Riddle a party, which he needs to honour without officially siding with him. Considering all that, is Regulus really his first concern? He tugs his cloak closer petulantly.

Yes, yes he is. How could he not be?

Amaterasu above, he's pathetic.

Alright. Mission plan. Does he have a mission plan?

Does he even have a mission objective?

He sighs.

Alright, short-term goals. That is a thing, he's sure. He's read about it. A mental health guide to something. Functionality, possibly. Not murdering your classmates in a fit of pique. The possibilities are endless.

A mission plan for this day. Don't embarrass yourself. Your Head of House is already afraid of you because you remind him of Riddle of all damn wizards. Try not to add to it.

Itachi is the soul of discretion.

Honestly, it would be easier if he was in any way in sync with the boy he is supposed to be. And up until a little while ago, he was. He lived as Sirius for *years*. And then Orion fucking Black had to lose every single molecule of sense and the rest—well.

It’s all Orion’s fault honestly. Itachi can’t be Sirius, can’t pretend to be a British wizard-child of eleven. Not when he’s bracing for an imminent fight to the death at all times. Torture and combat only bring out the worst in him, as it happens. And worst, in this case, is Kin-slayer Itachi.

It’s really bad luck, he thinks, that Slughorn keeps seeing him at his worst. Really, Sirius can be a charming little thing, when he wants to be. The Black features are very rewarding towards irreverence, and everyone likes a beautiful child.

Unfortunately, there is very little left in Itachi right now except for a weary determination and washed-out sense of great age and weight. He’s likely killed another father. He is Kin-slayer Itachi in both lives. This one, to be fair, is at least well-deserved.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The Sorting

(Wednesday, September 1 st 1971)

One of the best ways of avoiding suspicion is to project confidence. Any type would do; confidence drawn from seduction, confidence earned with skill, ancestry, money, charm and so forth. Itachi is an odd duck, in that Sirius Black has a solid claim on most if not all those categories. The traumatised, sulking, scrawny boy forbidden from using magic does not.

He comforts himself with the sure knowledge that, while this inconvenient truth is plain as day to *him*, it's not to these children. If a Shinobi couldn't bluff their way through a civilian school, there would have been a lot less Shinobi.

Are you done with your insane little pep-talk, he asks himself. No? Too bad, the train has stopped, and you had better be the first one off.

The night is clear, unfortunately. It would be simpler if it were windy and rainy. And less brightly lit. As it is, the picturesque little train station offers no cover, meaning children will be perfectly positioned to gawk at him soon.

One by one, children hop off the train, chatting about this and that. A part of him that will always be in existential awe of children of all shapes and sizes melts at the show of innocence. The second, bigger part of him, that is very aware of how trying the coming years will be, shudders in dread.

"First years," calls a deep, serious voice. "First years, come here."

The speaker is a middle-aged wizard, with every indicator of a retired Shinobi. The scars are a part of it, coupled with the impression that adolescent drama doesn't concern, alarm, or otherwise affect him.

Happy as a clam to have something to do, Itachi marches towards the Token Responsible Adult. His bow is low; lower than it should be, considering their social status. It's the scars. The man's obvious knack for survival earns him a lot of respect in Itachi's eyes.

The whispers increase because even an action this insignificant will be noted and discussed. A wave of exasperation crashes into him. Fucking children.

"Mister Black, I presume," says the Professor evenly. "You might be interested to know the school has received no fewer than seven reports that you are not, in fact, on the train."

Itachi slows his blink down, like a cat signalling it is not afraid. "I can't imagine why anyone would bother. Irrelevant, I suppose. "

The Professor hums. "Few things are. Irrelevant I mean. Either way, my name is Professor Kettleburn, the Magizoology Professor. I am thankfully not going to have to bother with you for the next two years at least."

Itachi cocks his head. "Merry meet, Professor Kettleburn." He bows again, just as low, with a bit of pettiness, admittedly. The Professor can pretend to be above such things, but he is an adult and thus annoyed at the twittering.

"Merry meet, Heir Black." Kettleburn's eyes are sharp and assessing, somewhat at odds with the amused curve of his lips. "You will learn that the traditional ways are rarely used between lecturers and students at Hogwarts."

"Lady McGonagall has mentioned it, yes. Since you've made it obvious that you will not be my instructor for at least a couple of years, I thought it would be appropriate."

“Cleverly argued,” says the professor. “I will allow it. Rhetoric won’t help you with some of the faculty but it will with most. Address me as you will, but don’t expect me to respond in kind. You might be a political animal outside of these walls, but in here you are just another student.”

Hmmm. That sounds personal. He meets the professor’s eyes and takes a moment to cast a slow look around, taking in the whispering students.

“I am sure Hogwarts is entirely apolitical, Professor,” he says, not bothering to modulate his flat tone.

Kettleburn’s lips twitch. “You are just another student to *me*, little Black.”

He has nothing to say to that, so he doesn’t. The professor settles for a sedate hum and shifts his attention to the breathless student body. “First-years,” he says, voice carrying despite the buzz of conversation. “First-years.”

Itachi has chosen his spot well. Half behind Kettleburn, he can barely be seen by the students. Such as Frank. Amaterasu have mercy, but he doesn’t have the strength for Frank.

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The group of first-years is bigger than he’d thought it would be. Fifty-nine, to be precise; fifteen boats of four including one Magizoology professor.

Nobody wanted to get in the same boat as Itachi. Amusingly, it wasn’t even his fault. The children, displaying a depressing lack of survival instincts, shied away from Kettleburn, not him. Civilians, he thinks, already exhausted by the children, this school and his life.

Kettleburn and he share their boat with the two people who hadn’t found a spot. The pair sport every hallmark of a wholesome upbringing. Muggle, he’d assume, with how ill at ease they were with their robes. Muggle-raised, or Muggleborn. Amusingly, they must have been

warned away from Muggle-hating Black, because they don't even try to introduce themselves.

Unimportant. This is all so profoundly unimportant.

The Castle is—something. While not quite the architectural wonder of Castle Black, it is much bigger, for one. *So much bigger.* From what Itachi has understood, Hogwarts has about five hundred students, give or take. This Castle could comfortably house five thousand, and that's if they're paying a lot of attention to comfort.

What, then, is he missing?

A question for another time. They have arrived.

Professor McGonagall meets them at the entrance and launches into whatever performative step tradition calls for. Not interested in the slightest, he takes his time to observe the first years.

The first observation that comes to mind is how ethnically similar the class is. British Europeans, with a few exceptions, are pale-skinned and narrow-faced, with little variation. He can pick out the Purebloods easily enough. Not all that surprising, considering the levels of inbreeding among the old families.

A pretty-faced, jagged-eyed boy ambles toward him and sketches a bow.

"Merry meet, Heir Black," says the boy. Who—who—he needs Regulus. Without his hissed abridged notes and endless knowledge of the peerage, Itachi is completely lost. The boy notices his idiocy because he continues smoothly. "My name is Athelstan Morgan."

Ahhh.

“Heir Morgan,” he replies. This deserves a deeper nod. House of Morgan is about as close to House of Black as it’s possible to find on the British Isles. “Merry meet.”

“If I may,” says Morgan, “I would like to introduce you to Heiress Esfir Shafiq.”

Ahh, he casts an amused look at the boy. He’s a sacrificial lamb, is he? A way to connect the three Sacred Twenty-Eight heirs in their year.

“Merry meet, Heiress Shafiq,” he murmurs, nodding at the curtsying witch. For such a young girl, the Shafiq heiress is memorable. All children are beautiful, but she shows every sign that she will become a remarkable woman. This should serve her well if she has plans to continue her House’s long dedication to diplomacy. Beauty is useful in such arenas.

“Merry meet Heir Black.” She seems to be much more at ease with the social manoeuvring than her—a friend is a strong term. Than Heir Morgan. What does he know about the relationship between their Houses—

Nothing. Nothing at all. He’s pretty sure they’re both Neutrals, but even that is a bit of a stretch.

“Please,” he says into the silence. “Call me Sirius.” Technically they’re the same rank—Sacred Twenty-Eight. Practically, while he doesn’t have to be the one to invite the informality, it is expected of him.

Heir Morgan blinks at him, idle interest tipping into boredom soon enough. The girl smiles. “Thank you, Sirius. Please, I am Esfir.”

“Athelstan.”

A strange, unwelcome thought slithers into his mind. Is it strange for him to be sharing a dorm with children? In ANBU, everybody slept together most of the time. On the other hand, ANBU squeezed every trace of innocence out of the recruits long before youth could become

a problem. Konohan view of such things never made much sense to him. Having sex with a child was assault, but sending it on a seduction-assassination mission wasn't. In the end, it's strange if he makes it strange. And since he's to date never had felt the inkling of sexual energy for anyone, the children hardly have a cause for concern.

"The sorting is about to begin. Students, please arrange yourself in pairs."

The Professor's words cause mayhem, as was predictable. Now, considering there is an odd number of students, there is hope he will remain alone--No such luck. A little elfin slip of a boy saunters up to him without much hesitation. His identity is no great mystery. With that nose, that hair and that jawline, the boy can't be anything but a Potter. Heir to the Noble House of Potter, since Dorea and Charlus Potter aren't likely to produce offspring of their own.

"Heir Black," chirps the Potter Heir, dragging Itachi bodily to the queue.

Itachi smiles. It is a crooked, twisted thing, and the most honest expression of joy or amusement he's produced this week. The boy is ridiculously charming. Well-loved, well cared for, pretty, smart and rich--and aware of it. There is genuine joy there, which nudges the scales from nauseating to charming. It's hard to dislike people who are thrilled with their lot in life. Shisui was one such person. Kisame was another.

He inclines his head into a deeper nod than the one offered by the irreverent boy. "Merry meet Heir Potter."

"So polite Sirius," says Potter. His voice is pitched into a playful coo, friendly but attention-grabbing. "May I call you Sirius? Excellent. Please do call me James."

Itachi blinks at the outpouring of charisma. Frank was one thing; that boy had a calm, soothing aura about him. Potter is vibrating with energy, his magic every bit as wild and energetic as he is. His first impression was way off. Not Kisame or Shisui. A trickster. An Uzumaki.

With how close the boy is to him, his micro-expressions are easy to read. Clever hazel eyes flash over Itachi's pallor, the limp, the skinny frame and the tremble in his hands.

A clever child is still a child. Potter must have been told about Itachi's, situation, but now that he's face to face with him, things are a bit more complicated. He has enough empathy and social intelligence to sense a problem, but not enough to grasp the scope of it, much less a solution.

"Gryffindor, then," Itachi asks, rescuing the uncertain Potter boy.

"Absolutely! Aunt 'Rea says I'd do well in Slytherin, but I am certain she was joking. I am no snake."

Itachi hums, amused. The faux pas was deliberate; a playful joke, that could turn not-so-playful if Itachi reacted unfavourably. The boy is testing him, and Sage help him, it's adorable.

"I agree that you would do well in Gryffindor. You appear to be quite daring." He pauses for a second. "If I can be honest with you, the House system is arbitrary to my mind. I wouldn't think a school should perpetuate stereotypes."

Thrown off by his mild tone and the unexpected bent of his reply, Baby Potter blinks. Did you come here determined to not like me, Itachi thinks, amused. Did you come determined to see a bigot?

Indeed, uncertainty threads through Potter's voice when he speaks, "Do you not want to be in Slytherin?"

"I do not want to be an extension of an idea," he says, pitching his voice to carry. These children might not be his responsibility, but they deserve the truth. "I do not accept anyone's right to pick out a trait of mine they appreciate, and spend seven years pruning me to fit."

A spark of curiosity lights up James' eyes and softens his meaningless smile. "Your Hogwarts House though—they're to be your family. Your home."

"I *have* a family," Itachi says, perhaps a bit too sharply. "I have a home. Even if I wasn't so blessed, I wouldn't want one to be chosen for me. Nobody has the authority to do that."

Easy, Uchiha. You're getting worked up. It's not safe. It's not—

Safe? He is here, isn't he? He is playing by their rules, wasting the precious, limited years he will ever get to have with his brother. They won, these nebulous *they* who make the rules. Itachi is here when he doesn't want to be. That's all they get. He won't pretend that he's *happy* about it.

"My House will be the place I sleep. It will be the place where children of supposedly similar character reside. Friendships may form, but they could have formed elsewhere, and I would not have known." It's a whimsical flavour of indoctrination, but Itachi can smell such things from across a field. "I will always be more than what an institution wants me to be."

"While I am loathe to interrupt a rousing cry for revolution," Lady McGonagall says into the ensuing silence, "the Sorting is about to begin."

Itachi is not fooled by the dry tone. She either agrees with the sentiment or approves of him declaring it. He nods at her, not at all self-conscious, even as the children titter. She is his intended audience, anyway. The children, bless, are practically foetuses. They might understand the surface of what he's saying, but the concept of freedom is still far away. Conversely, Itachi's life made him wise to what freedom can give, what it can cost and what wacky things one can be driven to do in its absence.

"Yes, Professor," he murmurs with a short bow. Somewhere along the way Potter and he had migrated to the beginning of the line. Cute.

The chamber she leads them into is spectacular, it has to be said. Over two hundred paces in length and about the same in width, over twenty meters high, and that's without taking into account the illusion of the night sky making it appear limitless. Upon second glance, he

notices the room isn't square, but hexagonal, with four parallel tables sitting the student body taking up most of the space.

Automatically, his body falls back to learned patterns. His spine straightens, his shoulders twist back and down, weight re-settling so his steps are light and theatrical. His head tilts, eyes lidding.

It's a rude performance, yes, but the situation calls for it. He is not an animal to be paraded around, awaiting judgment. What is the point of all this, he seethes, not for the first time. Why are you doing this?

His lips twitch in disgust and little Potter hums under his breath. "You need to relax, Black." What, no Sirius? "I don't know why you're trying to make everyone hate you, but it's going to work, and then what will you do?"

"Anybody who thinks it's appropriate to gawk at a child of eleven," he says, not bothering to lower his voice, "can go right ahead. It is where our relationship would have ended up sooner rather than later. It's only practical to start as I mean to go on."

A wave of whispers spreads from the students nearest to him, all the way to the back, where the older years sit. Chuckles mix through offended gasps and any number of reactions in between. His lips twist at the consensus. Arrogant, Dark, evil.

"You might be the most dramatic person I've ever met," hisses James, "and I've met your Aunt Cassie."

The Sorting Hat interrupts whatever his reply could've been by bursting into song. It's beyond charming, he admits. It's hard to remain disdainful in the face of such bald-faced whimsy. It's ballsy. It's tacky. It's ridiculous.

He loves it. The song is a loosely rhymed generic pep talk. Be good, which is not the same as not being bad; don't be afraid; learn. It would be trite if it wasn't sung by a *hat*. A ratty old, ripped up, sorry bit of cloth.

What a *delight*. When it stops singing, he is the first to start clapping. The others join soon, the entire hall united in delight. Why wouldn't they be? Only a very hard person indeed could remain indifferent to an expression of creativity and goodwill so unburdened with appearances.

"Ashe, Robin."

Hold on. It's alphabetical? Why not order them outside? Why force the poor girl to walk from the back?

Ah well. He's still riding the high of the song, the hat, and the disastrous excellence of it all. He can rein in his pernickety mind.

"Hufflepuff," roars the hat. Itachi loses his mind a little. Whoever designed and executed the animation charms deserves a reward. It tips its tip--aha-ha--back and opens its imaginary mouth—folds of fabric—and somehow emotes with the best of them. That, there is a *roaring hat*. What is this place?

The little girl—precious as every little girl is—skips to the yellow and black table, which cheers politely if a tad too exuberantly for Itachi's tastes. Then again, the intensity might be self-affirming, to less confident children. It's nice to be cheered for. He doubts Slytherins will be anywhere near as effusive in their greetings for him.

Aubrey, Isabell is sorted quickly into Ravenclaw, followed by Bates, Tammy who heads to Gryffindor.

"Black, Sirius."

Alright. He nods at the Lady, and then at James, before strolling to the little stool. Honestly, it looks like the whole sorting business could be a stunt. They had a Hufflepuff, a Ravenclaw, a Gryffindor and now he will be a Slytherin—

The hat barely touches his head, before it calls “Hufflepuff” to the flabbergasted chamber. The only thing he hears, as the Hat is taken off his head, is the impression of hysterical laughter.

He sweeps his eyes over the hall. Mind spinning, he stands up and looks at the hat.

“Well played.” He spins on his heel and makes his way to the mute Black-and-Yellow table, temporarily distracted from his sulk. This is different. This is unexpected. This is *interesting*.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Dinner

(Wednesday, September 1 st 1971)

Nobody speaks to him. To be fair, the Sorting is still going on. Baby Potter stares at him blank-faced and gaping, and he can hear laughter from the Gryffindor table. Godsdamn it, Frank.

Never mind that. Focus on the sorting. This is, as bizarre as you may find it, important to the children.

He wipes his expression clean and arranges it into a mask of polite disinterest. The placement is meaningless, but he can applaud the courage it took for an eleven-year-old to subject themselves to public judgment.

The Bones Heiress, with the odd name (ee-DOH-nee-ah), goes to Gryffindor, and the weaselly Burke boy goes to Slytherin. Evans, Lilly, a girl with every physical marker of an Uzumaki—tall, golden-skinned with long blood-red hair—argues with the hat for several entertaining minutes. When she's sent into Gryffindor, she hisses a wildly age-inappropriate curse at it before stomping off to the lions. Heron, Curtis, a blank-faced boy with improbably symmetrical features goes off to Ravenclaw.

More memorable than pseudo-Uzumaki is Lupin, Remus, a brown-haired, abused child who goes off to Gryffindor. For some reason, the child's barely closed wounds, scars and haggard appearance draw no attention from the student body. Here's hoping the faculty will prove to be more attentive.

That said, Itachi's hackles are wholly raised. From the look and sound of it, the child is not a Pureblood. If that is the reason he is left with barely treated wounds, heads will roll. There must be a medic here that can document the evidence of abuse. Failing that, there is also a convenient Bones Heiress with access to the DMLE. Not that Itachi needs it. He has a very open channel of communication with the Aurors, what with the ongoing investigation, Izanami wept.

Several children have been sorted while he was fuming. The Morgan Heir is the next child that takes a long time to sort. After fifteen minutes—throughout which the boy inches towards terminal levels of indifference—the hat calls for Ravenclaw.

James goes to Gryffindor even quicker than Sirius went to Hufflepuff. A Rosier goes to Slytherin, as does the Shafiq Heiress. Snape, Severus, who was paired with the loud redhead and kept up a silent communication with her over the hall, goes to Slytherin. Itachi's lips twist. The boy will not have an easy time of it in Slytherin with a Muggle name and Muggleborn friend. Then, his eyes catch on the marks peeking under his cuffs and collar and his vague compassion cools. Bruises. Snape's stiff movements and choppy gestures take on a more sinister meaning. Another name for his list. How many abused children could there be in a single generation, Izanami preserve him?

Eight children left—Travers, Turner, Vance, five—Warnock, Watts, Whitby, and, finally, Young. Warnock and Young join him at the Hufflepuff table, and the meal begins--

He spoke too soon. The man sitting in the golden chair, dressed in shapeless, tacky robes in purple, pink and green stands. All thoughts of hideous chairs and baffling fashion choices vanish from Itachi's mind. The man is *blindingly* handsome. Approaching the other side of middle-aged, the Headmaster's hair spills down his shoulders in luxurious auburn-red waves. His face—Itachi swallows. He did not expect to have to deal with this from a *schoolteacher*. The headmaster's face is Pureblood-perfect, except for one bold imperfection: his nose had clearly been broken at some point. That one departure from the norm—he is a transfiguration master, he could have fixed it with a thought—is what crosses the line between typical and breathtaking.

Itachi can see why this man frightens Arcturus. He can see this man being Riddle's fiercest opponent. Everything about the red-headed wizard is attention-grabbing. Itachi can feel his magic crackling and pulsing from dozens of meters away. He is tall and beautiful; his eyes twinkle, and he can pull off a hideous outfit. A force to be reckoned with, without a doubt.

“Welcome, students, new and old, to another year of learning at our beloved school. I know I should not keep you from your food for long—so I will not. Dig in!”

Itachi’s lips twitch, and he claps, impressed. Say what you will, but Albus Dumbledore has style.

He observes as the plates fill. He is still too exhausted and pathetic to focus much, but the flavour of house-elf magic is unmistakable. Huh. He hadn’t known Hogwarts owned house-elves. Good to know. Itachi—and, through him, Regulus—have solved this particular conundrum by enslaving themselves right back to Kreacher. Unbreakable vows may not be as clever as whatever ritual produces house elves, but they are excellent brute-force instruments. Itachi *will* die if he crosses the line, no ifs, no buts, no sorry-I-had-not-meant-to. He is very interested to learn how the school dealt with the issue.

“Is the food not good enough for you, Black?”

Itachi turns his head, curious. A child? You idiot, who else would it be? You’re surrounded by children. You’re practically drowning in children. That said, it is a *small* child. A first-year. Who is it—

“Fawley, was it?” He’s pretty sure he caught the kid’s sorting. Fawley, Preston. Vaguely Half-blood, blonde hair, hazel eyes, pale skin prone to blushing. Like now.

What little conversation going on in Itachi’s vicinity dies down. They’re not even *pretending* not to eavesdrop.

“Yeah? What are you gonna do about it?”

A combative small child, then. Adorable, and rather amusing, what with the cherubic locks framing a round face. “Merry meet, Fawley.” He nods amiably at the boy. “I hardly think I need to do anything about it. As to your earlier question, I am not permitted to partake. Healers orders.”

“Right,” sneers the boy. “I bet your fancy house elf will be bringing you food from your castle as soon as you get to the dorm. What are you doin’, slumming it in the dorms with us, huh? Why doesn’t Daddy buy you a private room?”

If the silence was tense before, now it’s heavy enough you can hear a pin drop. The second and third-year students pale. If his increased heart rate and clenched jaw are any indication, even the Fawley boy recognises he stepped into something beyond him.

Itachi cocks his head and tries to think through this unexpected tangle. It’s possible the boy didn’t know. Likely, even. Antagonism aside, the boy doesn’t seem like the type to taunt anyone with a murder attempt. Going that far at his age would either take specialised training or inborn malice Fawley doesn’t seem capable of.

What an unfortunate misunderstanding. Fawley’s issues with Itachi are hardly opaque. Blacks are in no way a force for good. Moreover, Fawley is far from unique in his opinions, and yet he managed to express them in a way that will make *him* look like the aggressor.

What to say? There are many ways to cut the child down, but he can't see many options for de-escalation. “Do you want to postpone this discussion to a later time, Fawley?” Take the hint—

Because he is eleven and foolish and flustered, the boy puffs up with outrage. “Is that a threat?”

Something throbs in his head, and a small sigh escapes him. “No, Fawley,” he tries again. “I am saying—”

“What—that you are too good for us? For me? That your daddy will—“

Gods, Fawley isn't one to keep his wits in a stressful situation. He is babbling, the poor thing, desperate to say anything the crowd will accept. It's not like he knows what he is saying. No, this has every hallmark of a child parroting things he had heard, hoping for success. In any other situation, he might have been successful, but now—

He stares at the boy edging towards hysteria with morbid fascination. It's not every day you get to see such a successful character assassination of oneself, and it’s been less than ten minutes into the term.

Seconds turn into minutes, and the horror of the onlookers grows. Finally, a somewhat older girl-child three chairs down sighs. “I cannot believe I have to say this. Fawley, for the love of Merlin, stop bullying Black.”

“What,” shrieks the boy, compounding his errors. The volume attracts the attention of the other tables and, more importantly, the staff. Their Head of House, judging by the black-and-yellow sash draped across her torso, is watching the table, lips pinched tight. “I’m not—He’s the one—He’s a Black—Come on, you heard what he said—”

“Prefect,” orders the stern witch-who-is-possibly-their-head-of-house, not bothering with further instructions.

“Right.” The girl grimaces, looking all sorts of unhappy. “Fawley, I can and will take points before the term has even started if you don’t pipe down right now. This is not the time or place for your bigotry.”

Ouch.

He looks at the Perfect, who eyes him back like she’s not on his side, and hates to be in this position. “Black, do you need something? I notice you’re not eating.”

Fawley squeaks something, but the boy next to him elbows him hard.

“I have a meeting scheduled with Lady, pardon me, Professor McGonagall, to discuss the specialised care the school has graciously provided. Thank you for your concern.”

The girl—thusfar unnamed—grimaces, sympathy mixing with irritation. “Yeah, that tracks. I’m Carol, Carol Hayes, the fifth-year Prefect. Come to me if you need anything, yeah?”

He makes his answering nod deeper to acknowledge her authority. “Merry meet, Ms Hayes. Thank you for the offer. I will be sure to do so, should it be necessary.”

“Wha—How is that fair—” hisses Fawley.

Hayes turns a gimlet eye on him. “You better be just stupid, Fawley or Professor Woodward will skin you alive for this.”

Fawley, finally having realised he’s pissed somebody off, settles down into a mortified, furious silence. These children will be the death of him. He can just tell Fawley will flounce from the table. He can just *tell*.

Thank the Lady that people have overheard him, and he’s in the house of Loyal. While the whole situation is a comedy of errors, it could’ve happened to some other severely abused kid. A kid who might not have had a life as a murderer to buffer them against such things.

Speaking of.

“Ms Hayes, I do have a question, if you don’t mind?”

The girl sends him a flat look. What— “Shoot, kid. And sweet Circe, don’t call me Ms Hayes. I’m Carol.”

He blinks and inclines his head. “Thank you. I assume the school has a resident Healer on board?”

“Yeah. Healer Febru is the resident Mediwitch. Do you need her to be present at your meeting with McGonagall?”

Itachi swallows a wince at the casual use of the Lady's name. He knows to expect it, but etiquette and hierarchy have been beaten into him for so long, it's jarring. "If possible. Either way, I am instructed to leave my medical information with Lady—Professor McGonagall."

"I'll see what I can do."

The hush that falls on the table after that banal interaction is a fascinating study. The Purebloods and the more informed Halfbloods are still shocked and angry. The cleverer Muggleborns have either found a source or are keeping their heads down, not willing to draw the ire of the Prefect so soon.

Finish your food. Get this over with.

The minutes drag by. He learns his classmates don't appreciate his eyes on them for too long. Too bad; he's dreadfully bored. Bored and unbalanced. It had to have been the Cruciatus. He couldn't have chosen a more straightforward spell.

Calm, now. Relax. In-out, pump your fists to the rhythm of your heart. Find an appropriate focus—Yes, the candles above Ravenclaw will do. You can't fall into a full meditation, but a focusing technique is enough. In-out, feel the rush of your blood and enjoy the taste of the air. Just—be. Be here.

His situation is worse than he thought because basic situational awareness is apparently beyond him. A hand falls on his shoulder, and he startles. A flinch turns into a full-body jerk, as he forcibly stops the instinctive reaction. His classmates likely haven't caught the move towards one of many hidden knives, but they might next time. He *must* get himself under control.

"Pardon me," he hisses, taking in a deep breath and turning to the stranger. "I was lost in thought.

A tall, nondescript boy looks at him blankly. “No harm was done. I am the seventh-year Prefect, Logan Moss. I have contacted Healer Febru, and she will join you for your meeting with your Head of House, Professor Woodward and the Deputy Headmistress. If you are finished, I will escort you now.”

Oh, thank the *Gods*. He glances at the head table—indeed Lady McGonagall and the the-supposed-head-of-house-with-the-yellow-and-black-sash are gone.

“Merry meet, Prefect Moss.” He inclines his head. “I am grateful for your assistance. We can leave presently.”

“See—see this—even the Deputy is fawning over him—”

How nobody informed Fawley of the situation by now is a true mystery. The child is alienating people left and right, over nothing more than a misunderstanding.

“You—boy. What is your name,” says Moss, voice not betraying a single emotion.

Fawley looks up at the tall, bespectacled boy. “Fawley, uh, Preston Fawley.”

“Detention, Fawley, with my compliments. You are the first Hufflepuff in recent memory to earn detention before you finished with the welcoming feast.” He turns to the other children sitting around the boy. “You should have corrected him. Keeping a fellow badger ignorant is not loyalty. I will not take points yet, but I will be discussing it with Madam Woodward. While Black and I are gone, inform your classmate of his error. Do it fairly. I will know.”

“Well, Black?”

Itachi, dazed by the show of competence, takes in the blank, apathetic face. Other than the glasses, there is nothing special about the boy. Taller than average, brown-haired, dark-eyed; mouth thinner on one side, one eye more tilted than the other. Nothing special and yet.

“Yes,” he says, a bit too late for it to sound anything but awkward. “Thank you, Prefect.”

“Excellent.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The Meeting

(Wednesday, September 1st 1971)

The Prefect leads him out of the hall to intense interest from his classmates and the rest of the school. Considering the nonsense that preceded it, he can't summon any real outrage.

The corridors are as mesmerising as the dining hall and twice as whimsical. The decor is just so—*frilly*. It's nothing at all like Castle Black, which, now that he thinks about it, is a miracle in itself, considering its occupants. Hogwarts, in contrast, flaunts all of it. Gaudy suits of armour stand on either side of the hallway. Enormous paintings sit on the walls, depicting deranged nonsense. A pig is washing a duck in one. In the next one, nine dressed-up ladies are having tea around an ornate glass table. Upon closer inspection, their white purses are full of frilly mice and frogs. One mouse has a pink ribbon around its neck like a bowtie and an umbrella hanging from a paw. One frog has a *monocle*.

Who built this? It's *genius*. Mad, gaudy, tasteless genius. A mouse with an umbrella!

They stop at a wooden door, bracketed on each side by, no joke, tree sculptures made out of steel, designed to mimic suits of armour. But for trees. This school… "I leave you here, Black. The Professor will escort you to the common room."

"Merry part, Prefect Moss."

"Indeed."

After a beat of hesitation, he knocks on the door and waits. This wasn't covered in his etiquette lessons. Typically, he was either escorted, invited, or apparated in by a house elf.

The door swings open; an invitation? Three witches wait for him in silence. He makes his way over, trying to absorb as much information about his opponents as he can.

He has already had a chance to observe Lady Minerva McGonagall. Pureblood-wealthy, strict, proud. Possibly a little biased against her gender. Disdainful of beauty, and those who covet it. Intellectually elitist, but would deny it. The epitome of Light witch.

The other two are less archetypal. Professor Woodward, Head of Hufflepuff House, is a bony, older witch. Too tall to be the norm, she brings to mind the image of a tree in winter, with prominent knuckles and joints, skin wrinkled but not sagging. The only true sign of age is the snow-white hair and depth of near-black eyes.

Healer Febru, on the other hand, is a middle-aged witch, with a fuller figure radiating strength. Between the two, he'd have chosen her to be the stereotypical Hufflepuff. Everything from her round, pink face to the blond hair falling down her shoulders in neat waves, speaks of kindness and loyalty and calm. Self-possession; competence. So much so, that he doesn't trust it at all.

All in all, his initial observations make him cautiously optimistic about the quality of staff in this school. All three witches appear to be eminently capable. Even poor Slughorn is an impressive wizard, bizarre hangups aside.

"Deputy Headmistress, Professor, Healer," he greets, with a low bow. His body twinges in warning; he ignores it.

"Mister Black," Professor Woodward says, while the other two witches settle for a nod. "Please, have a seat. You have some material for us?" McGonagall's accent--a thick, Scottish burr--has nothing on Professor Woodward's. He can't begin to place the tempo of her voice. Her consonants roll and they're spoken deeper in her throat, while the vowels are clearer and shorter than any of the native English speakers he's heard. He would place it in and around Russia, except he can hear clear Romanic hints.

“Thank you, Professor.” He eyes the chair with a little impatience. It's a test of some sort, that much is clear--Itachi is a head shorter than the other boys his age. With an internal sigh, he climbs onto the chair with as much dignity as he can; it’s not a lot).

What are they testing for? Temperament? Creative problem-solving? Humility? Seems a bit callous, for a civilian school. If this were the Academy, he’d be on board, but this seems like a lot to put on a handicapped child of eleven.

He meets their eyes calmly. The Healer is the most difficult to read, expression set in a jovial mask impenetrable by anything short of Chakra sensing. Oh, how he yearns for Chakra sensing. His Head of House is equally unreadable. It’s only McGonagall that’s somewhat transparent, and she’s spitting mad. *Hmm*.

He settles in the seat, and relaxes his muscles as best he can, tucking his hands in his sleeves. There is nothing shameful about his trembling hands; he is a child. He doesn’t *need* a reason for his hands to shake, but he has one nonetheless. That said, there’s no need to make a spectacle.

“My healers have prepared a binder of information for you. I understand that my diet has to complement the heavy regimen of potions I am prescribed. And, of course, I am not to use magic for at least three weeks.”

The shrunken packet hangs on his wrist, one charm out of many on the enchanted bracelet. It’s all very high-class. He unclasps the tiny thing and indulges in an exasperated look at the table. With an internal grumble—why did he even climb this dumb chair?—he slides off the seat and walks to the table. The table is about a meter high. Itachi is about as tall tall. The whole interaction seems designed to humiliate him.

He places the shrunken bracelet on the table as best he can under the circumstances and turns to his—appropriately sized chair? It’s McGonagall, he’s sure. The other two want to see him react, want to see what he will do. Lovely.

“I have another item I want to bring up.”

“Oh,” says Woodward. He’s a bit annoyed. She will earn the title back once she stops poking the near-cripple to see if he will flinch.

“Indeed. Mister Lupin. What is being done about his—situation?”

His Head of House grows blank, as does the healer. The other two, fine; they are teachers. But Febru is a Healer. A professional. He expected better from her.

“Mister Lupin is none of your concern, Mister Black.”

Itachi might have a problem with his Head of House.

“I am making it my concern, with all due respect. Either you handle it or I will. My situation, as complicated as it might be, still leaves me with a select few advantages. Direct access to a competent Auror team, for example.”

“Mister Black,” says McGonagall, having apparently had enough. “I am beyond disappointed in you. To think, someone in your circumstance would judge—”

Magic is heating his blood, and he can feel his shaky society mask crack. The day has been harrowing, he’s stuck in a boarding school, and these people think themselves fit to judge him? Who gave them the *right*—

“It is precisely my circumstance *Madam* that drives me to speak. If you think I will ignore the abuse of a child--with Dark Magic no less--then you do not know me very well, or the extent I am willing to go to if pushed. So, *Madam*, do not push me.”

A tense silence falls on the room. Good. They all have their lines, and this is Itachi’s. He will not be a party to child abuse. He was once, in another life, and he will not be such again.

“I think--”

Itachi bares his teeth at the potential enemy pretending to be a schoolteacher. “I know what Dark Magic damage looks like, Professor. You will not convince me those scars are anything but.” The disgusted glance he sends at the Healer is speaking enough to save him the effort of wasting words. He turns to McGonagall. “As Mister Lupin’s Head of House, you are *in loco parentis*. You can help.”

The change in demeanour is odd. Lady McGonagall brightens, as something between pride and vindication lights her features up. “Your concern does you credit, Mister Black. I see your placement was appropriate. Let me assure you that Mister Lupin is not abused by his parents. I will swear on my magic to that effect.”

Itachi narrows his eyes. The witch knows something. “It doesn’t count if they stood back and let the abuse happen. That boy is malnourished, his lacerations have barely closed, and look to be magic-resistant. Judging by the amount and layering of the scars, this has been going on for years. That paints a picture, Professor. I cannot—You cannot ask me to—”

Professor McGonagall smiles at him, which makes him blink. Why must they be so vexing? “Let me rephrase, then. I know what ails Mister Lupin, and it’s not something any of us here can help. I will not violate his privacy further. Rest assured that his parents are doing everything for their son, to their considerable detriment.”

Itachi slumps back, still damn angry, but willing to acknowledge he is in the wrong, here.

“I apologise, professors, Healer,” he says after a long beat. “I may have jumped to conclusions.”

“Perfectly understandable,” says McGonagall, eying her two colleagues with something complicated in her expression.

“Nevertheless. Mister Snape, is in a similar boat, I assume?”

The Professor stiffens, and the relief sours in his belly.

“Ah. You hadn't noticed. An adult strangled the boy, as recently as today. His wrists are bruised and he moves in a way that indicates difficulty. Judging by his behaviour, I would say he is used to hiding such things. Children often do.”

“I see,” says Woodward, expression as unreadable as it has been throughout this conversation. “Thank you for bringing it to our attention. Necessary steps will be taken.” She pauses briefly, looking him over, and coming to her conclusions. “I will be honest with you, Mister Black. I was against you attending Hogwarts this year.”

Itachi blinks, a slow succession of flutters. Is he supposed to reply?

“It was nothing personal, you understand. It seemed to me you were a volatile child, driven to violence by reasonable circumstances. Nevertheless, I feared that your trauma is still too fresh. Literature suggests that a child in your position is unlikely to function in an academic setting without causing damage to themselves and others."

For a long moment, Itachi draws a blank. He tilts his head. “I assure you, Madam, I will not attack first. I will retaliate if I must, but I will not harm a schoolchild unless I am compelled to do so by a considerable force.”

Woodward nods her head briskly. “That remains to be seen, Mister Black. I will take your words into account, but you underestimate the pressure you will be under. You are an uncommonly even-tempered child but I would nonetheless recommend you delay your schooling. You can test out of your classes if you would prefer, which would make up for the time lost.”

“That is not an option, Professor,” he says, trying to show the truth of it on his face. There is no point in being anything but honest with these witches. “This—attack—came at a bad time. Heir Black cannot be too unstable for Hogwarts. Heir Black is beyond that.” He pauses for a moment. “My younger brother would be the next Heir Black if I am judged unsuitable. I would do almost anything to prevent that from happening.”

Woodward watches him with an unhappy frown and a sort of baffled lack of understanding. She turns to her colleague. “Minerva, does that make sense?”

McGonagall's eyes flash. "More than I would like. Mister Black is in an impressive cage. He claimed a lofty title and now must defend it. Previous Heir Black, as it happens, was Orion Black."

Woodward hisses out a sigh. It's an odd sound, like wind blowing through the thicket. "I don't like it. It's difficult to judge the lesser of two evils, but I must remain impartial. If you are certain you are capable of attending, then it will be so. In return, I will suspend you the moment you over-react and maim the first student. Do we have an agreement?"

He bows deeply to the Professor, an odd move from his sitting position. "Thank you, Professor. The moment you judge me to be unstable, or incapable of handling myself, I will withdraw from school voluntarily and without complaint."

"And what do you require of me," says the Healer. He jumps a little, having somehow lost her from his attention. Her accent is foreign as well. The r's are too round, the vowels too nasal and full, ringing and with an unfamiliar twang.

He tries to arrange his face in the most harmless, childish smile without much hope for success. There's something about the cold of his grey eyes and ever-darkening rings around his eyes that can't do childish. Quietly tragic, yes. Mournfully Victorian, absolutely. But childish? Not a chance. "If I may be frank, I thought to secure myself an ally, in case Mister Lupin's case was questioned."

She looks at him for a long moment, conveying her absolute lack of patience without so much as a twitch. "I am familiar with Mister Lupin's case in its entirety. I will familiarise myself with Mister Snape's soon enough. What I am not familiar with, is your case, Mister Black."

Lovely. That's just *lovely.* "That is… not… important," he tries. "A team of Medics has already treated me?"

"Nice try," says the Healer. "We can do this now, or we can do it later when I drag you to the Hospital Wing. I suggest the former."

He sends a pleading look at McGonagall and Woodward; they remain unmoved.

“Alright.” Not really. “Where do you want to begin.” He pauses for a moment. “I don’t know how much I am allowed to tell you. The case is ongoing, and I don’t want to jeopardise it in any way.”

After a quick *Tempus*—just over 1900—the Healer hums. “Understandable. How do you suggest we proceed? Can you describe the effects on your body without going into what caused them?”

He mulls it over for a moment. “I can do that. Alternatively, if you feel that you require more information, I can ask Auror Shacklebolt to schedule a meeting. He would be aware of what may be released to the public.”

The Healer exchanges a charged look with the other two professors. “Agreed.”

He looks at his Head of House for approval, wise to the ways of those in authority. The chain of command is not easily circumvented. In this case, the Headmaster is on the top. After him come the Heads of House, then the Deputy Headmistress and the teaching staff. The healer is near the bottom with supplementary staff. He gets his nod.

“Most of the lasting damage is caused by prolonged exposure to the Cruciatus curse.” Let’s start with a bang, why not? Indeed, the witches are too professional to gasp, but their shock is still plain in white knuckles and tight lips. “The residual nerve damage has proven to be difficult to manage.”

He pauses and untucks his hands from his sleeves. It’s a good visual aid. His hand trembles to the point where writing will prove to be difficult.

“The magical exhaustion is a secondary worry. I had exhausted the entirety of my magical core for reasons I cannot disclose. The healers forbid magic use for a couple of weeks. That about covers it, other than some minor physical injuries that have already been dealt with.”

“Everything is relevant, Mister Black.”

Itachi bites down a sigh. “I can give you second-hand accounts. I was told there was mechanical damage to the neck, tongue and jaw. They re-grew most of my jawbone and teeth while I was unconscious. Similarly, they vanished and re-grew a couple of vertebrae.” Magical healing—If Lady Tsunade could only see it—“Mechanical damage to the skull led to a concussion. They didn’t need to use skele-gro at all; spellwork had sufficed. Most of the skin and flesh on my hands was regrown.” Is that it? “Oh, I think they re-grew the tip of my tongue.”

The silence in the room is more oppressive, now. Which, yeah, is fair. He survived, but the margin was slim. The absurdity of his near death will likely hit him soon. Now is not the time.

“You will not reconsider,” Woodward says into the silence. “You insist on attending classes? With injuries that severe, nobody would fault you for taking the time to recuperate.”

“I must try. “ A pause. “I want to try.” Huh, look at that—there is more truth there than he knew.

“So be it. Your professors will be notified.”

McGonagall shifts in her seat and leans forward. “This trial—you know what to expect, I hope? We cannot shield you from the attention of your peers.”

“The children, Professor, are the least of my worries.” Gods’ own truth. In the sea of worries, the children barely register.

“Your courage is to be commended, if not your common sense,” says Woodward. For the first time, her firm professional tone wavers with something—a twinge of humour perhaps?

“You’ve taught a number of Blacks, Professor. I can’t imagine we’re blessed with an overabundance of common sense.”

This conversation ended up being much more pleasant than he feared, initial unpleasantness aside.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Introductions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Wednesday, September 1st 1971)

The entrance to the Hufflepuff dormitory is as maniacally whimsical as the rest of the Castle. A stack of barrels—entirely too conspicuous to be anything but a lure—stands in a corner. The second one to the left is false. Madam Woodward demonstrates the sequence of taps he needs to do, to open the trick door. An incorrect sequence sees one drenched in vinegar. Because that is how one runs a school.

The wooden staircase extends in and out of the barrel, leading into the, presumably, common room. If not for the hundred-some children staring at them, he would love to focus on the architecture of the room and the sense of peace and comfort that fills it.

Amaterasu preserve him, what a wild concept; a hundred children. Numb, he stands behind the tall Professor. He should join the children, probably, but he is hardly eager to draw any more attention to himself.

“Welcome, students, to Hufflepuff House. My name is Madara Woodward—”

His ears stop working as training kicks in. He blanks his mind, quietens his thoughts as best he can, and arranges his body into a loose, ready position. Is this—Is this a joke? *Madara?*

Focus. Listen. Analyse.

“—your new home. This brings me neatly to a point of discussion. Namely, one Sirius Orion Black.” She sends him a speaking glance, and he manages to paste a tense smile onto his face. *MadaraMadaraMadara*.

Hopefully, his sudden shift in attitude will be attributed to nerves. Hardly ideal; he’s spent considerable time convincing her that the children don’t affect him one way or the other.

“Mister Black is one of your Housemates. One of your fellow Badgers. His time in Hogwarts will not be easy. I would be proud if you showed the qualities of your House, and extended the principles of loyalty to him. I do not demand it of you; I merely ask.”

She looks over her students, while Itachi does his level best to stay relaxed and appear non-threatening. “With that said, while I cannot order you to be kind, I can and will instruct you not to be cruel. You will not harass him. You will not single him out. You will not bully him or give him preferential treatment. Your instructors will follow the same guidelines.”

It’s a nice speech. He’d appreciate it more if the speaker didn’t claim the name *Madara*. If this world is a dumping ground for villainous Uchiha, Itachi’s game plan goes up in flames. The ‘slow and steady wins the race’ approach only applies if he isn’t surrounded by reincarnated megalomaniacs. If that *is* the case, he’s killing the woman, grabbing Regulus and Kreacher, and booking it to the Amazon jungle. Or throwing himself to the mercy of the Goblin Nation.

The professor speaks some more about things of no consequence. Itachi will be joining no clubs and isn’t interested in after-school activities. The speech drags on, ten minutes, then twenty. Many words are used to impart very little information. Where the first years are to study, which study groups they could join, and what procedures they need to follow to form said study groups. Where they are allowed to go when they are to be in bed, and at which times are they allowed to go to the Kitchens for extra food? He listens to the speech with half an ear, focusing instead on the matter at hand. His competent, professional Head of House could be an S-ranked maniac come to torment him the second time.

“Any questions?

Finally. The fear of public speaking and/or ridicule ties the children up in knots, which results in a marked absence of questions.

“Very well. Your Prefects, by year.” A handful of slightly older children file in behind the Professor with acceptable discipline. Two faces are recognisable. The girl—Carrol Hayes. The boy—Moss. The rest rattle off their names—irrelevant for now—and stand back.

“The Prefects will handle most of your day-to-day concerns. By the end of the month, I expect you to elect a representative for your year. That person will be meeting with me and the Prefects to report your progress, problems and requests. If you do not choose your representative responsibly, another will be chosen for you. If you do not cooperate with your representative, you will be denied the privilege in later years. I assure you, that is not a place you want to find yourselves.”

There are eight boys in Hufflepuff this year. The sleeping arrangements are so charming, they almost distract him from the possibility of his Head of House casting an illusion onto the moon.

Like most everything, he suspects this, too, is magic. The boys’ dorm consists of one nonagonal room, from which eight smaller rooms are extended. The bedrooms are modest, big enough for a bed, a desk, a bookshelf and a wardrobe. The central room makes up the luxury, with a carpet as thick as his thigh and dozens of cushions strewn about. Two wide bookshelves, a sofa and a couple of armchairs complete the picture.

“The bathroom is down the hall,” recites the Prefect, a proper little scion of the Smith family that he failed to catch the name of. “A printout of the class schedule hangs on the door.” She points to the bedrooms. “Each of you has your own space. No specific wards are set around it. If you, for some reason, wish to change this, talk to a Prefect, preferably the seventh years, or Madam Woodward.”

She pauses for a moment and looks them over. She is traditional, after fashion. Her manners are a strange compromise of choosing what to say to whom. Itachi makes a note to find out what is the norm when it comes to etiquette, should he end up staying in the school. There are quite a few Ancient and Noble scions in Hogwarts, after all. No Lords or Ladies, as far as he knows but Heirs, certainly. He is not that invested in the hierarchy for its own sake, but it does provide a nice distance. A pattern of interaction that his under-socialised, lunatic little heart appreciates.

So many questions to ask. And yet, he just wants to get to his room, hide behind curtains and call Kreacher.

“Black, Fawley,” calls the Prefect, jarring him from his thoughts. “Madam Woodward is aware of your—disagreement. She will likely consider Perfect Moss’s punishment to be sufficient, but if that is not the case, she will call on you to discuss the matter further. I recommend—” She sends an irritated look to the blond, “—that you keep the peace. Yes, Fawley, I mean you. Black has, Merlin help us, been the model of civility.”

“Since I don't hear any questions, I will leave you to your introductions.”

Itachi's dismal mood sinks further. She had to say the cursed word ‘introductions’ and now he will be kept from his bed even longer.

“Right,” says one of the boys—what was his name—Minch—March? “My name is Paul, Paul Marsch.” Newly named Marsch—not a Wizarding name—is, well, unremarkable. Pretty in the way of children, brown-haired and brown-eyed, neither skinny nor fat, neither tall nor short. His wand—dark, longish, polished, with no obvious handle—sticks from his pocket in a show of recklessness that makes Itachi cringe. “I am—glad to meet you?”

Fawley is next. Say what you will, but Fawley is not what one might call shy. “I’m Preston Fawley. I am a muggle-raised Halfblood.” He pauses, sending a disgusted look his way. Itachi blinks back, making his expression as bland and herbivorous as he can. “I live in Manchester and I look forward to Charms.”

“Noah Young,” says a pale boy, with dark red hair and the sort of protruding ears and a wide jaw that he will grow into in a couple of years. “I was born in Dublin, but I grew up in London.” His voice is soft, a bit shaky. “I, uh, I am Muggle-born? Sorry, is that how introductions are done in the Wizarding world?”

“Only if there are Pureblood supremacists around,” sneers Fawley. Itachi can’t quite suppress a smile in time. The kid is relentless. He reminds him of Sasuke’s little boyfriend.

“That is possibly my cue,” he says, mild and pleasant. “My name is Sirius Black, and as some of you may know, I am the Heir to House Black.” He scans his audience. As expected, Young doesn’t have the first clue about what that means. Neither does, if he’s not mistaken, the dusky-skinned little fawn lurking in the back. “The title is largely immaterial, in Hogwarts,” he continues, most speaking to the two Muggleborns. “It is comparable to Muggle Peerage. My family is fairly highly placed.”

“Blacks are Dark and don’t believe a word he says otherwise,” says Fawley. “How or why he ended up with us is beyond me, but it will end in ruin. He belongs with the Slytherins like the rest of his slimy family.”

What a prickly little thing. Best not address him directly. The last thing he wants is to get into an actual altercation with the boy.

“While the spirit of Fawley’s statement is untrue, he does raise one true point. My family has thusfar been sorted exclusively to Slytherin. I can’t imagine that this information is of any interest to you, but it is true.”

The children—sans fuming Fawley—huff in laughter. They’re hardly amused, but it’s a fair way of expelling some of the pent-up tension.

“I am Andrew Clarke,” says the fawn in the back. The boy’s bronze skin and light hazel eyes are cast golden in the torchlight. “I don’t understand. You are telling us Sirius is bad because his family is bad?” The boy’s voice is a wonder, a thrilling, musical soprano that, Sage-willing, won’t break into something less appealing in the coming years.

“You’re Muggleborn,” says Fawley, clenching his fists. “Blacks hate folk like you. They think you stole magic from Purebloods and should all be killed for it.”

“For your information,” says Clarke, “I am a Halfblood. Not that it is any business of yours.” He looks between Fawley--blonde, plump, the picture of health--and Itachi--tiny, gaunt, looks to be moments from collapsing--and comes to the obvious conclusion about who the bully is. It would be so easy to let them believe it. But—He sighs. These children are not his responsibility. But. He is the adult here, and they do need to learn.

“He’s not wrong,” he says. “Not about me, of course. He is wrong about me. I care very little about blood, other than keeping my own where it belongs. But a lot of my family are frightfully bigoted. In Muggle culture, they would be comparable to sympathisers of the Grman National Socialist Party.”

All the boys are visibly taken aback by his words, and none more than Fawley. “See,” he crows, victorious. “He admits it! I am telling you he is no good. People like him shouldn’t even be allowed in Hogwarts if you ask me!”

That is the last straw for another boy, a dirty blonde, gangly fellow with a long face and prominent eyebrows. “Nobody asked you,” he says, as sharply as an eleven-year-old coltish boy can. It works, especially with the odd accent. “God, you sound just like them. The Purebloods.” He huffs and squares his shoulders. “Name’s Scott, Scott Cole. I am a Halfblood, which is a stupid thing to include in an introduction Fawley, and something I would expect from the bloody toff over there.”

“Merry meet,” says Itachi with a faint smile.

“What does that mean,” asks Clarke, golden eyes flashing. “No Fawley,” he adds, “I am asking Sirius.”

Itachi ignores Fawley’s hiss of outrage and looks at Clarke. “We have time for the short answer only, I am afraid. I would like to sleep as soon as possible.” If only he could go straight to sleep after this mess. “The short answer is that there is a segment of the Wizarding population that identifies as Traditionalist. You could think of them as roughly analogous to the Muggle Tory Party. Since the Traditionalists are disproportionally from the Peerage—what some call the Sacred Twenty-Eight—their rules of conduct are predictably complicated. ‘Merry meet’ is the standard greeting one would use at the start of a conversation.”

“How do you know so much about muggles,” says another boy. “Hi, I’m Robert Kimball, sorry to interrupt. I was just curious. Most Purebloods wouldn’t know about the Tories and all that.”

“I read,” he says, going for light but ending up closer to dry. “Muggle political and philosophical thought is far more developed than the Wizarding one, I have found.”

“Your parents made you read Muggle books,” Kimball asks, voice thick with justifiable scepticism.

Itachi can’t help but picture Walburga Black reading about Muggle politics and swallows a huff of laughter as best he can. “My parents are the closest any of you is likely to come to a real-life Nazi.” He pauses, considering whether he should add something as a qualifier. Nah, that covers it pretty much. “We were never close,” he adds. “And they are currently in the custody of the DMLE. Law enforcement.”

“Wow,” says the last boy, with tight black curls, a pouty mouth and features androgynous enough that he could pass for a Noble brat if they weren’t so unusual. Pretty, but unusual. “That sounds intense. Nazi parents. Like a movie.”

It’s Itachi’s turn to blink. Movie? The boy misunderstands him. “Oh, pardon me, I am Timothy Warnock, but everyone calls me Tim.”

The name tickles something in the back of his mind, erasing any thought of muggle technology. “Warnock,” he says slowly. “Do excuse me, this is frightfully rude, but—I can’t quite place your name, but—”

“I’m sure it’s nothing, it’s a common enough name.”

“No, no,” he says trying to get some clues from the boy's face and body. “I am sure I read something—”

“I really don't know—”

“Mary,” he says triumphantly. “Mary Warnock.”

The boy—Timothy—blinks and arches his eyebrows. “Aren’t you young for all that stuff? My mum’s fans are all old.”

“Stuff and nonsense.” He eyes the boy more closely. “Your mother is a brilliant scholar. You should be proud.”

“I mean,” says the boy, “I am proud of course, but it’s all so boring.”

Children.

“Pardon me,” says Clarke, “I grew up in London, Muggle London that is, and I have never heard of Ms Warnock.”

“You wouldn’t,” says Timothy. “She’s not famous or anything. She’s a teacher.”

Hah. That’s not going to fly. “She’s a philosopher.” he corrects. “And a published author of some renown.”

Clarke nods once, then once more. “So you, Black,” he says in a declarative fashion, as if confirming something, “you are a fan of philosophy?”

Itachi looks at the golden-eyed boy. This is deliberate. More deliberate than he would expect from an eleven-year-old civilian. These magical children are far more mature than he feared. “I am no scholar if that’s what you mean. That said, people confuse me. Philosophy has gone a long way in explaining why humans are the way they are.”

“Right, right,” nods Clarke. “And you,” he says, shifting Fawley’s way, “think he is a racist?”

The grimace of derision is odd to witness on such a young face. He is so unguarded, it’s almost comforting. “He’s a Black. You don’t know these people. They are rotten, all of them.”

“Seems to me he’s a pretty relaxed kid,” says Young. “You’ve been insulting him for hours now, and he hasn’t so much as said an unkind word to you. Or anyone else.” Who is the bigot here, hangs in the air. Itachi is in equal parts charmed by the open-mindedness of these children and worried about their lack of common sense.

“Fawley is not wrong to be cautious,” he says, drawing seven sets of eyes to him. “The kindest thing one could say about my family is that we are a mixed bag. If one of my cousins was in my place, his warnings would have been well placed.” He sends the fuming boy a fond look. “He is perhaps a bit inflexible in his views but that is not, in itself, a fault.”

The boy opens his mouth to argue but closes it again when Itachi’s eyes sharpen. “Now, I do apologise, but my day has been long, and my bed awaits. Merry part.”

Some of the children—notably the Muggleborn children, which is all sorts of ironic—parrot the greeting back at him. He can hear the discussion grow in volume after he leaves. They’re good kids, he thinks as he’s closing the thick curtain behind himself. All sound cuts off—a silencing spell—and blessed silence finally envelops him.

Now, then. He unshrinks his luggage with a tap of his wand, wincing at the shriek of his body. It seems even that is too much magic for his battered body. Wonderful.

“Kreacher,” he says. “If you have a free moment-”

—pop—

Kreacher’s eyes are even bigger in his face than usual, and his body trembles with barely contained nervous energy. “Thank the Lady,” he says, eyes cataloguing every tremble of Itachi’s hands, every hair out of place. “Kreacher was worried.”

“Well,” he says, “you might as well continue to do so. This Heir of Noble and Ancient House of Black has been sorted into Hufflepuff.”

“Oh, we know,” says Kreacher. Beat by beat, his face loses tension, replaced with the reserved softness Itachi had gotten used to. “Lord Black has eyes in the Castle.” He shuffles closer to Itachi, who spreads his arms. He’s had a stressful evening. He deserves a cuddle.

“Painted eyes, I would assume?”

Kreacher huffs, hand smoothing down his hair. His “Yes. Lord Phineas Nigellus Black organised a very up-to-date information network. Your every move will be tracked.”

“Need I worry about my position in Grandfather’s good graces?”

“We all had suspicions, child.” He can’t see Kreacher’s face, but the blend of fond and exasperated is very familiar by this point. “Lord Black is not surprised.”

“And—”

Kreacher sighs. “Our little star is struggling. Lord Black has hired a Mind Healer.”

Relief punches through him and an even half of the churning stress evaporates from his system. “Oh thank the Lady,” he says.

“There was talk,” Kreacher says carefully, “of you needing something similar.”

No, you think?

“We are all aware of how insane I am. Professional help would be appreciated. Who knows, it might even help relax some of the faculty.”

The faculty. Madara. *MadaraMadaraMadara*.

“My Head of House. She. She could prove to be a problem.” His words are choppy things, barely gritted out. Kreacher and Reg know the bare bones of his previous life, but nothing as granular as names. They know of Madara, in that they know there his life featured a stable of villains, some more powerful than others. They don’t know that he was family. That he was insane and hurting and a genius. That he was fanatically determined to cast an illusion that would let him believe his love still lives. He hasn’t, therefore, said *anything* about Madara. “I will write a letter to Lord Black about it. Could you deliver it for me? I dare not send an owl.”

“Of course, child.” Kreacher pauses stroking his hair for a brief moment. “What happened?”

“Nothing—yet.” True. “Initially she struck me as capable. Fair, balanced, tough. Nevertheless—I have my suspicions. She could be like me. A soul out of place.”

“You are no such thing,” Kreacher snaps. “You are exactly where you need to be. Your soul is home, child. Never think otherwise.”

“As you say.” It’s a nice sentiment. Foolish, but nice.

Dear Lord Black,

Since you are already aware that I have been sorted into Hufflepuff House, I will write no more of it. It is not what I was expecting, but Hogwarts has a way of upending one’s expectations.

In a way, the sorting is beneficial. For all that the Hufflepuff is unused to someone of my background, they have so far displayed the characteristics of their House. The children have been more welcoming than is perhaps warranted.

I am writing to you to inquire about one of my Professors. If you haven't already done so, could you provide me with the background research on my Head of House, Lady Madara Woodward? She has not displayed any ill will towards me, but I require some additional assurances.

I have not written to Regulus yet—I do not know if my missives would be welcome. If you think I am in error, please let me know.

I remain,

Your caring grandson,

Sirius Black

Heir of Noble and Ancient House of Black

He doesn't have to wait long for a reply. Kreacher pops back with a letter and a folder, less than thirty minutes later.

Dear Sirius,

In regards to your inquiry, I have attached the abridged notes of the lecturer in question that my investigators have compiled. If you have any specific questions, I will certainly look into the matter.

As for your sorting, I am in no way surprised. If anything, I am gratified you condescended to be sorted at all. My Lady Wife was convinced you would refuse.

Regulus is scheduled to start his seasons with the best Mind Healer I could find, that would agree to an Unbreakable Vow of silence. Healer Rosier, a distant cousin to Lord Rosier, comes highly recommended. I will write to your professors at Hogwarts to organise your meetings with Healer Rosier at the end of the week.

Look after yourself, child.

Your Grandfather

Lord Arcturus Black

Lord of Noble and Ancient House of Black

Professor Madara Woodward

Born name: Inga Ozola

Birthdate: Thursday, September 19th, 1861

Birthplace: Kingdom of Livonia

Born into a family of Healers, father Jūlijs Ozola and mother Līna Ozola, nee Kalnina. Parents moved to Britain with Inga, during the civil unrest in Livonia. Jūlijs worked in St Mungos and Līna worked in the Auror department, as their resident medi-witch. Both lost their lives in the Grindelwald wars.

Career

- Inga Ozola did not attend Hogwarts, and got her certification in Herbology at the Durmstrang Institute, after an apprenticeship with Professor Elise Albrecht.
- From 1901-1917, walked the “Path of Yelena”, which merited her several invitations by the Livonian Council to return to her mother country. Refused all offers (presumably because of the fate of missing (?) siblings) and returned to Britain.
- From 1918 until 1922 she worked to establish a new wing of the St. Mungos Greenhouses (named Jelena’s Garden).
- Underwent the Name of Power ritual in 1923, and took the name Madara Woodward
- Walked the “Path of Jelena” from 1923 until 1939
- Was awarded honorary Mastery in Healing by St Mungos Hospital upon her return to Britain in 1939
- Fought in the Grindelwald Wars, from 1939 until 1945, as a front-line healer. Both of her parents perished in the wars.
- Accepted the position of Herbology Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in 1947
- Publishes several treatises on Healing
- Most notable achievement in her chosen field of Herbology was the development of a series of charms to allow for quick propagation of the famous herb Capricious Cleavers. She was nominated for the Order of Merlin, 3rd class, which she refused.

Personal life

There are no notable witches or wizards connected to the Professor. She doesn’t have any progeny, nor many close friends. Notable is her close relationship with the Centaur herd that inhabits the forests around Hogwarts Academy. It is speculated it is precisely the Herds that have led the famous healer to teach at Hogwarts.

Well now. Itachi finishes pouring over the document, and while the brief overview raises quite a few questions, it does go a long way in calming him. His insane ancestor was many things, but a healer was not one of them. Briefly looking at the Professor's life, makes it clear she cannot be the megalomaniac he knew. What exactly the 'Path of Jelena' is, he doesn't know, but Madara would never spend thirty-two years in obscurity for any reason.

No, whatever the unfortunate circumstance of her name is, it is by all accounts no more than a misunderstanding.

Chapter End Notes

—> it really is a misunderstanding, you guys. I just - I am trash, and there is a Latvian name Madara and yeah I couldn't resist.

—> Helen Mary Warnock is an ethicist of some renown irl. She doesnt have a son Timothy, as it happens, but stealing real people and smushing them in is practically part and parcel of writing HP fiction

—> The worldbuildign stuff will be explained later on in the fic. If you want, I can include a separate fic, to compile the details as we go, like I did in my other fics? Like, class lists, professors, famous witches and wizards and so on.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Classes

(Thursday, 2 nd September 1971)

It's 6.45 by the time he finishes with the morning ablutions, and he fully expects to be the first one from the lot. Not so. Two boys sprawl over the cushions, chatting; Timothy-whose-mother-is-thrilling and Clarke-with-the-golden-eyes.

"Merry meet," he says, keeping his voice low, out of respect, but also because it's entirely too early to be energetic in any way.

"Sirius, hi," chirps Timothy. "Oh, no, sorry. Merry meet!" He bends his body at the waist and bobs a little in the air before raising with a blinding grin.

"You don't need to use traditional greetings." Itachi's voice smooths from *sleep-hoarse* into *look-at-that-precious-baby-bird*. "I certainly do not expect it, as you do not require me to change my own."

"Well, yeah. I know I don't have to, but my dad always says I should use the local customs when I travel abroad."

Itachi pauses to give this due attention. The analogy is distressingly apt. "You must have read some excellent literature before coming to Hogwarts. That said, the Traditionalists only make up a portion of the Wizarding population. The Progressives do not use the same greetings. Indeed, I would assume most find them offensive."

That was the right thing to say, apparently, because Clarke relaxes a little from his wary posture. “They do. In most cases, I would too.”

“Wha—why,” Timothy asks.

“Most of the people who use those words don’t even want to look at me,” Clarke says. “Ordinary words can turn to insults when said with malice. Purebloods can make you feel worthless with nothing more than a ‘merry part’.”

Hold on, didn’t the boy ask last night—Never mind. Leave that for later.

“Wow,” says Timothy. “That’s rough.”

Poor child. What can you even say when you’re ambushed by talk about bigotry and extremism practically straight upon waking? “Our society is far from perfect,” he says instead. “That said, breakfast is in order, I think.”

“I will join you,” says Clarke. “Tim?”

“Oh, sorry, no,” the boy hurries to say, all but stumbling over his words. “I promised I’d wait for Noah.”

“Very well,” hums Itachi. “Merry part.”

“Merry part!”

What an adorable child. Here’s hoping that the world is kinder than what Itachi's lives have made him expect. The idea of Timothy’s bright smile dimming is not a pleasant one.

They make their way out of the common room without issue, but not further than that. Traumatized or not, a Shinobi does not lose his situational awareness just like that. Itachi remembers the path Professor Woodward led him by, and this? Isn't it? Magic Castls, hey? What joy.

“You haven’t been around many people, have you?” Clarke says, ostensibly to the air.

What an odd way to start a conversation. “Not as such. Our Presentations were big events, but other than that we hadn’t left the house until my Hogwarts letter came.”

“*Purebloods*.”

Good enough as openings go.

“Why did you ask about Traditionalism? You’re obviously familiar with the customs and such.” Familiar enough to be off-handedly derisive of them.

Clarke cuts his eyes at him, considering. “Sorry about that. I was testing you, I guess.”

Clever.

“Not a bad approach.” Gods’ own truth “A bit obvious; I’d have noticed soon enough. But, I suppose you’d have had your answers by then, so it wouldn’t have mattered.”

Clarke makes a small hum in the back of his throat but doesn’t comment. The silence is a balm. “Sorry about your parents," he says a few minutes later. They are still roaming the corridors; pangs of hunger are starting to make themselves known. “Fawley was cruel.”

Itachi shrugs, grateful the other boy isn't insisting on eye contact. It's much easier to direct his words to the air. "My parents deserve what is coming to them." He pauses. That was unhinged for the early morning. Then again, if Clarke *is* familiar with their society, he might be happy to know that a line exists, even for Dark Purebloods. "Grandfather will see them thrown in the deepest pits of Azkaban. As for Fawley—I'm sure he has his reasons."

"A lot of people dislike your family for personal reasons. That doesn't mean they get to badger you."

Hah. "He will get over it." He will have to. Life isn't kind to kids like Fawley, who fearlessly attack those more powerful than them.

Clarke cuts his eyes to him for a moment and looks away. "It doesn't bother you? That everybody talks trash about your family?"

This kid asks hard questions. What is there to say? House Black is powerful, wealthy and well-warded enough that they don't need to bother with the opinions of the working class? A lot of my family are extremists? You think I don't care now, but if anyone said an unkind thing about Regulus I would tear them into itty bitty pieces?

"No, I suppose it doesn't." And that is for the best, considering. There is only so much hypocrisy a single being is allowed before the Gods decide to intervene. "Not from the children at least."

"What about the Prophet?"

The Prophet. A gossip rag it might be, but in Itachi's book, the press is such a novel concept he doesn't begrudge them their sensationalist nature.

"I don't read the Prophet," he says, "and even if I did, I likely wouldn't care."

"Right," says Clarke, with a fair bit of scepticism.

Again—what can he even say? The Prophet prints what would sell. “It’s complicated.” Good work, so eloquent, so informative. “I don’t understand the appeal, but I’m not the target audience. If that is the level of journalism the people will accept, more power to them.”

“You talk like an old man, has anyone ever told you? I’ve not met a kid as stuffy as you in my entire life.”

“And you’re blunt,” says Itachi. “Why so much interest in me?”

“You’re kidding,” says Clarke. “Why so much interest—Sirius, you are the most talked-about kid in Europe. You were on the front page of the Prophet for the past year.”

“Really?” He blinks. What could they have possibly written about? “I understand why they would be writing about me now, but I never even left the Black property until my Hogwarts letter came.”

Clarke tilts his torso sideways, sending him an incredulous look. “Your Grandfather changed the laws so you and your brother can have Gringotts vaults. That was big news, Sirius. Super big news. It changed lives.”

“Oh, yes,” he says. “I forgot about that.”

Clarke clenches his jaw a little. “No need to rub our noses in it.”

Amaterasu save him from the fragile egos of children. “He didn’t do it because he wanted to spoil us. My brother and I needed to have free access to money, so we could stay away from our parents. The Nazis in prison, remember?”

“Oh,” says Clarke. “Damn. Sorry.”

Itachi flaps his hand. “It’s fine.”

The conversation pauses, for which Itachi is desperately grateful. Clarke—Andrew—is a sweet child, curious and intelligent, but Itachi hasn’t talked so much to someone outside his family since Riddle.

“I think we’re here,” says Clarke a few minutes later. “Now turn right and—”

Izanami smiles upon them. The large, double-sided monstrosity of a gate leading to the Hall is there.

“I think this is your seat,” says Clarke. Itachi looks to where he’s pointing and, sure enough, the seat sports a little sign with the Canis Major constellation on it. If that wasn’t clear enough, unlike most dishes, his seat is surrounded by decidedly health-oriented choices. Steamed vegetables, soft-boiled eggs, blanched chicken, oatmeal, it's all there.

He eyes the sugar-laden dishes the other children are helping themselves to and suppresses a sigh. That boy is dipping a banana in chocolate. There are pies and cakes everywhere, and he gets to chew on carrots.

“Healers orders, yeah?” Clarke has the good grace to frown with sympathy. “That sucks.”

“In-*deed*.”

He is left to eat in peace, thank the Gods. Whining aside, he’s a growing boy who remembers the life of a Shinobi. Treating food with anything but respect is as taboo as anything and more than most. Yes, the other children get sweets and pastries and pies, but they aren’t half dead and recovering. The elves did wonders within the rules. Itachi *saw* the list of dietary restrictions the healers had prepared. And even if they hadn’t—Uchiha ate ten times the calories the civilians did. Wizarding children aren’t quite there, but a developing core and a

growing body burned through a *lot* of energy. All of which is to say that Itachi would pour bland oatmeal down his throat by the barrel if it was necessary

The rest of his classmates—including the girl-children—file in when he's worked through the savoury offerings, oatmeal and is relishing the fruit salad. There are fifteen Hufflepuffs in his year. His mind wails, hands keeping steady by some miracle. *Fifteen children*. They're not your responsibility. They're *not* your responsibility.

"So Sirius," Timothy chirps, having sat two seats away from him. "Are you looking forward to classes?"

Sage help him.

"I am not sure," he says. "I enjoy Potions. History of Magic sounds like a thrilling subject. How about yourself?"

"Who, me?" Timothy spreads his arms wide, rattling in excitement. "Everything! It's a magic school!"

His lips twitch, and something in him unwinds at the show of cheer. Everything else aside, a world where children are this innocent can't be all bad.

"What about the rest of you guys," Timothy continues. "What about you, Robin?"

A girl with short brown hair and a chin sharp enough to cut raises her eyes from her meal. "Oh, well," she says, a bit taken aback by being in the centre of attention. "Charms, I think."

Itachi shrinks in his seat a bit, as the children chatter around him. He should introduce himself. And he will; just not now.

The children quiet right down, however, eyes trained at someone behind him. With a fair bit of dread, he turns around—

“Sirius,” sing-songs Frank. “Merry meet.”

He stands up from the chair. The polite smile starts to sit more naturally on his face, even if it wants to go crooked with exasperation. “Merry meet, Frank.”

“I missed you on the train.”

Of course you did. “My apologies. I was, ah, gathering myself.”

“Understandable, understandable,” Frank says airily, sharp eyes cataloguing every inch of him. “I was concerned, one might say. All my letters returned unopened. And then the Prophet—Well.”

Ah.

“It’s a bit of a long story,” Itachi says. “I was—behind rather extensive wards at the time.”

“Right, right,” hums Frank. “I won’t keep you too long, don’t worry. But tonight, after class, I will be monopolising you for at least an hour or two.”

There is no getting out of this one. “Of course,” he says, defeated. “You’re the Head Boy, you know the Castle. Pick me up after dinner.”

Franks’s smile is as blinding as the rest of him. “Smashing.”

“Frank, before I forget,” he says. “Have you met the first years?”

“I have my eye on baby Potter, don’t worry your pretty little head.”

Amaterasu have mercy. “Pretty—Lady love you, no, I hadn’t meant James.” He pauses for a bit, considering. “Although, yes, do keep an eye out for him. He is a hellion, I can tell. But just—keep an eye out for the first years?” He shouldn’t have started this topic in the open, but his mouth ran away from him. These children are dragging him down to their level, Sage wept.

Frank nods, a serious look flashing across his face, before tipping back into forceful joviality. “Of course, that’s what I’m here for. Quick, before I leave you with your friends: Regulus is fine, yes?”

“Regulus is hale and healthy,” he says, not maybe keeping his tone as light and unconcerned as would be appropriate. “Not a hair out of place.”

Frank closes his eyes for a moment before his merry facade is back in place “Well, then, everything is fine and dandy. Do tell him Mother misses his letters?”

Regulus has been neglecting his correspondence with Lady Longbottom?!

“It’s been a turbulent time?"

Mercifully, Frank allows the deflection. “Well, I’ll see you after dinner, then.”

“It’s a date,” he says, quirking his lips in a crooked smile.

Frank huffs at him but settles for reaching with his giant hands and straightening his tie. (A ridiculous, bright yellow tie that makes him look that much more sickly.) “Take care, Sirius. Merry part.”

“Merry part,” he says and turns back to—

A sea of curious eyes.

Damn it Frank.

“Soo—” Timothy says, as they’re walking to their first lesson of the day—Transfiguration, as it happens. “Who was that?”

Well, at least he had the patience to wait this long. “I suppose you mean Frank?”

Timothy blinks at him, with dogged patience. “Heir Franklin Longbottom,” he says, when it becomes clear he won’t get to avoid this conversation. “Heir to the House of Longbottom. He’s—a friend.”

“Isn’t he a bit old to be a student?”

Itachi’s lips twitch. “He’s a seventh-year.”

“I wouldn’t think a Black would be friends with the Longbottom Heir,” says the girl—Robin. “Hi, I’m Robin. Robin Ashe.”

“Merry meet." Judging by her easy confidence, she’s likely a Pureblood, if not one he recognises. “Frank is not one to be limited by what society expects.”

The girl blinks but nods. There is not much more to say about it, frankly.

“Do you know many Hogwarts students?” Timothy asks.

Where is this classroom? He can only deal with all these inquisitive children for so long.

“I wouldn’t say so. My cousin Narcissa is in Slytherin, and she’s the only other Black in the school. There’s James, in Gryffindor, and I suppose I’ve briefly met the Morgan Heir and the Shafiq Heiress.”

“Really,” says Ashe, tilting her head with surprise. “There are quite a few Noble Purebloods in this generation. I thought you all knew each other.”

Itachi is saved from answering by the arrival at the Transfiguration classroom. Thank the Sage.

Now—where to sit?

Clarke solves the dilemma by nudging him into a seat in the middle of the room and sitting next to him. Itachi blinks at him a bit, taken aback by the forwardness, but is ignored. Alright then.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

A/N -- Edit for style and structure. Content is the same

(Thursday, 2nd September 1971)

They're paired up with Ravenclaws for the lessons. There are exactly fifteen Ravenclaws, he notes. Fifteen Ravenclaws to fifteen Hufflepuffs. Not at all suspicious, magic hat.

"Sirius," says Heir Morgan, with all the enthusiasm of a puddle of slime.

Adorable.

"Athelstan." If he's not mistaken—and he would hardly have trouble reading an eleven-year-old civilian—that, there, is a truly antisocial child. Why his parents even insisted on formal education—That was a stupid question. His parents sent their antisocial Heir to Hogwarts for the same reason Lord Black sent his half-dead, insane Heir to Hogwarts. Because it is the Done Thing.

The kindest he can do for the poor boy is to let him be. A kindness which is not afforded to him by the child who sits next to him. Unlikely companions, he thinks, amused, looking at the dirty blonde girl with every marker of an overachiever. Not made, in his humble opinion, with equal consent of all parties.

"Hi," she says with the sort of determined cheer of a woman on a mission. "I am Patricia. What is your name?"

For a moment, Itachi blinks at her, certain she cannot possibly be talking to him.

“Merry meet, Miss,” he says, fascinated against his will. “My name is Sirius Black.”

“Oh—how quaint.” She smiles. It is a pretty smile, it has to be said. The Morgan Heir droops in his seat. “You talk like Athelstan. Is that normal for you?”

“Yeah, Sirius, is that normal,” Clarke says under his breath.

“I—do not follow,” he says, keeping the incredulous note from his voice by some miracle.

“You don’t talk like the rest of us do.” Her eyes are too intent to match the bright, fixed smile. She’s not antagonistic, but he thinks she will become so, soonish. Why is she not in Slytherin?

“I have found the student body speaks in a wide variety of accents.” There. Polite and diplomatic.

She pouts. For a long beat, Itachi considers he is hallucinating. Did a girl-child just pout at him? “Hmm, maybe. So, you and Athelstan—how long have you been friends?”

That ends up being the final straw for the Morgan heir. “We’re not friends. I don’t have friends, Parry. Now if you could—”

Parry. That’s her last name. Finally. He can’t continue calling her ‘girl’, even if it's only in his own head.

“Don’t be rude, Athelstan. I’m simply getting to know your friend—”

“Heir Morgan is correct, Miss Parry,” he says. She is pretty, an extrovert, and an ambitious one at that. Itachi doesn’t know a whole lot about children—even less about civilian children

—but he knows a dominance display when he sees one. “We are simply acquaintances.”

Morgan sends him a flash of gratitude and he suppresses a smirk.

“Oh,” she says, faltering for a moment, before rallying. “Well, I’m sure you will be friends in no time. Why, I—”

The cat on the desk transforms into McGonagall, and Itachi barely manages to stop his hand from throwing the knife in his sleeve. There was not a single shimmer of illusion; not even a build-up of magic. Just—cat and then human.

“Welcome, students—”

Transfiguration, he re-affirms, is split into inanimate—fascinating--and animate—incomprehensible and most probably evil. Since they won’t be touching animate for a good few years, he buries it in a medium-security pit in his mind and moves on. He doesn’t look forward to the scandal he will cause when somebody instructs him to soul-torture an innocent animal in class, but that is a worry for a later time.

Lunch whizzes by, filled with chattering children and bland food. His classmates are full of vim and vigour, and Itachi—can’t. He’s not in a particularly bad mood, but the buzzing energy of the children is generating tension in his mind and body. Grandfather better have found a good mind-healer; a professional intervention is very much needed.

He does notice increased attention from the Slytherin part of the room. He’d have to be dead and buried not to, considering how many of them stare at him. It’s probably got something to do with the Prophet. Whatever it is, it’s not important right now.

Potions are next, a four-hour block before dinner, and then Frank. Potions, he looks forward to. If he can’t have Runes, then Potions are the next best thing on offer.

The class is with Slytherin this time. Clarke doesn't have the time to monopolise him, having been beaten to the punch by the Shafiq girl. Esfir? She glides over and bobs a curtsy smooth enough to make a maiko seethe.

"Merry meet, Sirius." Her smile is as practised as the rest of her, but he feels none of the exasperation he had with Perry. He's, quite possibly, a filthy hypocrite. The difference might be cosmetic, but he appreciates Shafiq's networking more than performative friendliness.

"Merry meet," he says, making up for the fact he can't quite remember her name with a deep bow. "Are we to be partners?"

"We must," she says, iron cording through her tone. "I would so like for us to become friends."

He can't quite make himself offer her his arm, but he can nod. "After you, then." He turns to his classmates who stare at Shafiq with a mix of awe and terror. All except Fawley, oh, Great Lady, no—

"Filthy, slimy traitor," says Fawley, and dooms them all. "Didn't I tell you—"

Shafiq arches her brow. Eleven-year-olds should not be this poised. "Sirius, who is the person sneering at us?" She raises her hand. "No, I beg your pardon, I don't particularly care. Let me rephrase. *Why* is the person sneering at us?"

Words cannot express how badly he does not want to be in this situation. True to form, Fawley may have found the worst person to insult. House Shafiq might be less wealthy, but they are impeccably connected. To make matters even worse, somehow, their Heiress is *ambitious*.

When in doubt, flatter. She might permit herself to be mollified yet. “I would apologise in his name if it were my place, gracious Lady. As things stand, I assure you he did not mean to include you in the feud he is attempting to start with me.”

What little oxygen there was in the room disappears. The Slytherins either freeze or lean forward, depending on the relative level of schadenfreude. What were you thinking, you imbecile? *Feud*? A fantastic choice of words. What next—a vow, perhaps? A duel?

A small silver lining is that Shafiq is as thrown as the rest, which distracts her from thirsting for the boy’s blood. “The Half-blood child looks to start a feud," she says, voice a little faint. "With the Ancient and Noble House of Black.”

“Fawley is harmless, really.” Change the topic, somehow. “He doesn’t know what he’s saying—it’s not appropriate to hold him to our traditions.”

He cuts his eyes to Clarke and tries to signal that he should make sure Fawley doesn't open his fool mouth and digs them deeper. “Shall we sit?” He can offer his arm after all. Anything to avoid locking Fawley and himself—and, more importantly, Fawley’s family—into a decades-long feud.

Shafiq regains her composure as quickly as you can please, although her smile is brittle around the edges. “Let’s. Unless there are some further interruptions.”

“Now hold on—”

He cuts his eyes to Fawley and lets the seriousness of the situation seep through. “Be. Quiet.”

It does the job. Fear skitters over his cherubic face before it settles into belligerent stubbornness. Doesn’t matter; the boy keeps his tongue behind his teeth, and that is a blessing. The Slytherins collectively flutter in their seats like birds re-settling their feathers, but the sound of Itachi’s patience running out means more to them than to the Hufflepuffs who twitter fondly. Some even roll their eyes at him—notably Clarke and Timothy.

All this and class doesn't start for a good quarter-hour. Amaterasu give him strength.

"Tell me, Sirius," says Shafiq after she claims their seats—the second closest to the front, the third row to the right. Good spot. She probably orchestrated it. "How do you feel about your sorting?"

He doesn't shrug but implies he would do so if he were in less august company. "My Lord Grandfather assured me it was all but written in the stars. I was the only one surprised. Not that it matters much. As I have already said, I have a House. I am a Black before I am anything."

There. That's smooth enough—and covers enough points he wanted to cover. He kept his position in Grandfather's good graces and the second-hand power this affords him.

"I would have doubted if Mother hadn't already confirmed that Lord Black spoke to her about it, at the—event you threw a few weeks back."

"Well, if anyone would know, it's Grandfather. He effectively raised us."

His eyes roam around the room until they fall onto the Snape boy, sitting alone, hunched into himself. It's not completely obvious—it is a fair attempt at subterfuge, considering the boy's age. The Hat's decision to place him in the wealthiest house was cruel. All the other children are upper-class, confident and groomed to be vicious. Compared to them, Snape looks like a wildling.

"You don't happen to know the boy sitting in the front? With the second edition of *Potions Through the Ages* that it took me months to find?" He says, faux-casual. It has the benefit of being true. Kreacher couldn't find it anywhere. They would have given up if Lady Longbottom hadn't mentioned that precise text in one of her letters. After that, Reg had to have it come what may, which meant Itachi was prepared to wage wars. In the end, Grandfather had to step in and acquire the text lest Itachi resort to burglary.

"His name is Snape," she says, eying the book with a spark of idle curiosity. She must not know the text by name, or she'd be more impressed. "It doesn't surprise me he's well-

prepared for this class, considering his lineage."

His lineage? The boy looks glaringly Muggle. "Oh?"

"His mother was Heiress Prince, once," she says, pitching her voice in that irritating faux-whisper the upper-class brats use when they want to suggest a lowered voice while being heard by everyone. "Ran away straight after Hogwarts." She pauses again, this time more honestly. "I can't say I blame her, either, not with a betrothal like that."

Hmmm. That's an opportunity, right there.

"I will introduce myself after class, then. With Lord and Lady Prince being *as they are*—" Childless, inbred, miserable and deranged. "—He is Heir Prince in all but name. Family magic will snap him up sooner or later."

She eyes him with an arched brow but doesn't press. Indeed, she sneaks a considering look at the hunched-over boy when she thinks Itachi is not looking. Mission accomplished. The boy is not likely to remain a pariah with the attention of both Heir Black and Heiress Shafiq. When he adds Frank to the list, that will be three Sacred Twenty-Eight Heirs on his side. Morgan is, probably, un-gettable.

Slughorn waddles inside, finally, all but dripping amiable stupidity. He's overdoing it, he thinks critically. Not that it matters; it's good enough for the children, and Itachi is not his target audience.

Potions are always interesting. Slughorn doesn't do much more than go over an outline of the year, but even that is good enough after the horror that was Transfiguration. The discipline is structured sensibly; that much is clear even in this watered-down version.

Shafiq lets him go at the end of the lesson but hangs close, curious how this will play out. Snape has two choices if his standing in Slytherin is what Itachi suspects. Either he will try to

leave ahead of his classmates or hang back until they're gone. He chooses the latter option and is slowly packing up his supplies, trying to appear as casual as possible.

Itachi's movement through the classroom doesn't go unnoticed. The hush that falls on the room is as annoying as ever. Instead of acting like the token adult he is, Slughorn notices Itachi moving in his direction and dives into the storage room, babbling nonsense about preparing ingredients. Theatrical, cowardly *slug*—

If Snape was tense with his Head of House in the room, he's frozen now, shoulders curled inwards, head bent so his face is obscured by the heavy curtain of hair.

"Merry meet, Master Snape," Itachi says when he's within polite distance, but not so close to crowd the boy.

"Merry meet, Heir Black," Snape replies through clenched teeth, back straight. Brave, thinks Itachi. Unlike their Professor, this one has a spine and a fire that will keep him going after others have given up.

"Please, call me Sirius," he says, carefully pitching his voice into as non-threatening cadence as he is able. Which for him means emotionless, but it's a work in progress. He's not a disarming type of child. "I wanted to compliment you on your choice of reading. It took us months of ineffectual searching, and even then we had to fall back to our Lord to source it."

Snape looks at him with well-worn suspicion, like he's waiting for a punchline. He's smart enough not to attack first, but certainly willing to throw down if challenged. "Sirius, then," he allows. "My mother—" he changes track, somewhat smoothly. "This edition is the only one worth reading."

"I bow to your superior knowledge. The parts of it that I read were fascinating, but I cannot say I would be able to judge its quality yet."

"You've read it," Snape says, arching one impressive brow.

“Parts of it. I appreciate Potions. They make sense.”

For a moment, a ray of happiness shines through, and he looks like a child for once. “I think so too—” Snape cuts off whatever he was saying, having realised they are watched by every child in the room. Or at least, every Slytherin.

Irritation flashes through Itachi, and he sends a dismissive look at the on-lookers. Children. Alright so maybe his lips curl into a sneer, but that’s neither here nor there. He wipes the expression from his face, before addressing the boy—the last thing he needs is for the boy to think Itachi is mocking him. “You were saying,” he prompts, keeping his voice calm.

“I—Potions,” says Snape, nerves making his words stumble. “I will be a Potions Master one day.”

Not surprising, considering. Princes have been potioneers as long as there were Princes. He nods, acknowledging the clam. It’s important to encourage children, he’s pretty sure. “I don’t doubt it. I plan on a Mastery in Rune-work.”

“That’s—specific?”

He shrugs. “Blacks don’t have a fixed talent as some do.” As Princes do, hangs in the air, visible, but not verbally acknowledged. “We dabble in most things. Wards suit me, I think.”

“Right.” Snape finally stands up, moving towards the door. The Hufflepuffs have already cleared out, and Clarke and Timothy wait for him by the door. The Slytherins haven’t moved from their seats, although they packed at least. Shafiq stands a few meters away and sends him a significant look.

Right. Traditions.

“Master Snape,” he says, and the formality in his tone must tip the boy off that something is happening. “May I introduce Heiress Shafiq.” He turns to her. “My lady, Master Snape.”

“Merry meet,” says Shafiq, dipping into a barely-there curtsey. It can’t be helped—Snape’s claim to Nobility is strained at best. The fact she’s acknowledging him as a member of the upper class is plenty.

“Merry meet,” says Snape warily, but bows. It’s rusty and unpracticed, but ultimately correct.

An awkward pause falls, where the two eye each other with a sort of baffled surprise.

“If you would, Master Snape,” he says once it’s clear the two have no idea what to say to one another. “I would introduce you to some of my classmates. Merry part, Heiress.”

“Merry part.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Frank

(Thursday, 2nd September 1971)

“Soo—that happened,” Timothy says when they reach Hufflepuff common room. Potions might be captivating, but they’re hell on robes. His fine silks and linens are soaked with disgusting materials. Lady help whoever is in charge of cleaning them.

“Specify, if you would.”

“The girl—Shafiq. She’s your sort, right? Noble?”

Itachi nods absently. Classes are over, he can get away with more personalised clothing. “She’s Ancient and Noble, yes. Very old family, very powerful.” He hesitates. There are things to add here, important information for them to know. That said, going into it now feels like torture. “Politics are, unfortunately, going to follow me through Hogwarts. I am not averse to explaining it, but you will find it boring.”

“Yeah no, I get that,” Timothy says, expression clear and charming, all charisma and innocence. “I would be happy to stew in ignorance, but, well. You snapped at Fawley. Why? He was pretty tame, in comparison.”

Lady, it’s going to be one of those conversations.

“I will answer your questions after a shower. Deal?”

“Look at you, mister aristocrat,” whistles Timothy, once Itachi is dressed and ready.

Itachi rolls his eyes a little but tugs his coat close to his body nonetheless. Warming charms are well and good, but furs are furs. “Yes, yes, very droll. You had some questions about Heiress Shafiq?”

Timothy snorts, looking all sorts of adorable with the chunky muggle sweater under his school robes. “I don’t care about her. Something about that conversation made you snap at Preston—Fawley. That makes me, I don’t know. Nervous?” The look he sends at Itachi is devastating, all wide, earnest eyes of a child looking for answers. Honestly, these children are not his. He shouldn’t feel so wretched about not having explained everything, already.

“You’re right to be,” he says. “This is more than a Shafiq-shaped issue. If Fawley is not careful, he could get himself into real trouble by insulting the wrong person.”

“Like you,” Timothy says, tilting his head. “You’re one of those people he shouldn’t cross.”

Well, yes. That’s definitely true. “I am laid back, as these things go,” he says which is both true and so outrageously false Reg would have passed out from laughing. “I don’t *want* conflict. Shafiq does because she will win. Destroying Fawley’s entire family to demonstrate her position can only help her.”

“*What?!”*

Itachi nods, mouth thinning. “It’s considered bad form to leverage your House to solve interpersonal drama. You *can*, if you are high enough in your House’s hierarchy, but it will cost you social points.” If only that’s where it ended. “That said, Fawley has a knack for making sweeping, generalised accusations and insults that will get him into trouble. I can only ignore so much.”

Timothy blinks and bites his lip, chewing it with a heavy frown. “So, earlier, with Shafiq—”

“If he called me a traitor and she was there, it would be over. She’d report it to her family within the day, and then the mess would begin.” He resists the urge to drag his fingers through his hair. “I understand it might sound like an exaggeration, but it’s not. Magical world is not like the Muggle world. There are no laws against discrimination and our judicial system more or less boils down to the Wizengamot. My family has had an even third of the Wizengamot in their pocket for centuries. It’s not even a secret.”

Several long moments go by in silence, as Timothy tries to make sense of this. It’s a lot, Itachi knows, and he hasn’t even scratched the surface. “They would ruin a family’s reputation over a few insults? Just like that?”

Oh, you fuzzy little sheep. Itachi would be *thrilled* if reputational damage was all they did if they heard a ‘*Mudblood’* was bullying their Heir.

Best settle for a version of the truth. “It’s a particularly volatile time, for my House and in general,” he says. He’s never had to condense the conflict so much, it’s almost blasphemous to try. “On a societal level, the tension is only growing, and the class divide is causing friction. More narrowly, my House has recently come under fire, as you may have gathered. My Lord Grandfather will do a lot to avoid showing weakness. If that means crushing an innocent family for a few remarks made in bad taste, he won’t lose sleep over it.”

“That’s—” Timothy pauses again, expression disturbed. “Messed up.”

“I’m not the perfect person to ask. You should talk to your mother about this.”

“Oh, I will. That’s why I’m talking to you about it now. I need information.”

He smiles a little at the absolute lack of manipulation of any kind. “Excellent. In the meantime, someone should talk to Fawley and explain why he should only bring up this stuff in private. I don’t mind him—I quite like his courage and stalwart nature. But things are very rarely as simple as that.”

He’s amassing quite a diverse circle of acquaintances, it seems. He’s got one from every house, even. There’s Frank and James in Gryffindor, Clarke and Timothy in Hufflepuff, Morgan in Ravenclaw and Snape and Shafiq in Slytherin. Cousin Narcissa, too, but he feels no need to bother her.

On his way to dinner, he makes sure to nod to Snape in passing. The boy nods back, as prickly as before, but that’s alright. The boy doesn’t need to like him or trust him. He just needs to be visibly included in the ‘Asset of House Black' category.

The meal itself is predictably uneventful. He speeds through his food and heads straight to the Gryffindor table. Explaining the Fawley Thing to Timothy has stirred up some concerns. Frank is the perfect person to intervene.

“Merry meet, James” he greets his pseudo-cousin.

James twists in his chair like an eel and beams at him, wide and mischievous. “Well, if it isn’t the Black Sheep of Hufflepuff! What brings you to our den?”

“Black sheep, goodness, I’ve never heard that one,” he says in his blandest tone. “So witty, well done. I’m here to pick up Frank, as it happens.”

“Be still my heart,” comes from a few seats away, as the Longbottom Heir swoons in his seat.

Itachi sighs. “Lady give me strength. I should get going, James, but I’d like to talk to you one of these days.” Snape is handled, more or less, but the Lupin child is still in the wind. James is the Gryffindor equivalent of Shafiq, at least in their year. Shafiq for Snape, James for Lupin, Frank for Fawley, and all his problem kids are solved.

“Sirius,” James says, batting his eyelashes. “You can’t invite multiple boys on dates in plain view of each other. At least have the decency to do it in secret.”

Itachi’s lips twitch. It’s impossible to summon even a twinge of annoyance. “Alas, Aunt Dorea still hasn’t given me her blessings. You are a prize without compare, to be certain, but the dragon guarding you is fiercer than this humble one.”

James’ laugh is as lovely as he is, unrestrained and ringing so brightly it leaves a tangible impression long after it’s gone. “I stand by my words. You are, by far, the most dramatic person I’ve ever met.”

“That may well be true. Now, if you would excuse me, I have a Longbottom to talk to. Let me know when you have time for me. Merry part.”

Frank is kind enough to not tarry. He finishes with his dinner and waves off the horde of friends and admirers who eye Itachi with a decent mix of suspicion and confusion. On one hand—the infamous Black monster. On the other hand—a shrimpy little Hufflepuff with bird-bones and a thousand-yard stare. It’s hard to reconcile the two.

Frank ushers them out of the Great Hall and through endless staircases. That is no exaggeration; Itachi has to stop to catch his breath several times, which is such an outrageous state of affairs, that he will lose sleep over it. *Itachi Uchiha, out of breath while walking up a staircase*. On top of his simmering self-disgust, Frank is growing more upset by the moment. Even his affable idiot mask starts slipping.

Finally, they stop at a random section of a blank wall. “Wait here, for a mo’” He walks in front of the door three times and a door appears. For a long moment, Itachi lives in the in-between state of helpless admiration and baffled outrage. Sure. Why not *that*?

The room is large and cosy, in shades of browns and golds. There is a fireplace, large leather sofas, blankets and cushions strewn about, and a huge oak desk in one corner.

“Come, come,” Frank says, moving towards the armchair. “Welcome to the Come-and-go Room. It transforms into what you want it to be.” Itachi feels a large, important part of his sanity die a fiery death. Some of it must play out on his face because he chuffs a little. “I know. Don’t ask me how it works.”

Mind still chasing itself, he allows himself to be herded into the prime spot on the sofa, right next to the fireplace. A transforming room; what does that even mean?

“Now, what in Merlin’s name happened? Is the Prophet—” Frank breaks off, probably uncertain how to bring up attempted-murder-by-parent. “Are you—”

Has it been less than ten days since the whole mess went down? Circe, but it feels longer than that.

“It’s a miserable affair all around, I’m afraid,” he says, letting some of the weariness wrap around his words. “I wanted to be Heir, so I cornered Lord Black into supplanting Orion Black. Orion took exception. Kreacher brought Grandfather quickly enough to save both our lives.”

Frank tucks his legs further into his armchair and watches him with a very lost expression for a long moment. He looks young like this, Itachi thinks. It’s sometimes hard to remember that this world is still much more innocent than his previous one. In Konoha, the kinslaying would have been scandalous, but the violence wouldn’t be out of place. “So it’s true? What they’re saying in the Prophet?”

“I don’t read the Prophet, but it was pretty bad. Orion and Walburga are in prison, and the trial is set for October.”

“Are you—you’re not okay, of course, but—he didn’t—”

Itachi cocks his head a little. What is Frank’s goal here? They’re not friends. At best they’re possible future allies.

“You have to be more precise, I’m afraid. I can’t imagine you want the details of the, ah. Incident.”

Frank blanches and wraps his arms around his knees. “Merlin, no.”

“I’m fine,” Itachi says, still confused about where Frank intended to take this. “Most of the damage was healed, and the rest will fix itself in time. Now, onto more important things. I need your assistance, I’m afraid.”

Frank blinks at him, caught in some internal struggle, but what exactly it is, is beyond him. “Oh?”

Itachi nods. “There are three problem children in my year who need help that nobody wants to give except me.”

The corner of Frank’s lips tilts into a small, humourless smile. “I don’t suppose you count yourself in that number?”

“My problems are above your pay grade, I’m afraid,” he says with a touch of humour. “Grandfather has hired us a Mind Healer. No, I’m talking about Lupin, Snape and Fawley.”

Frank stiffens, and an unreadable expression falls over his face. “Lupin,” he says, voice mild. “That would be Remus Lupin, one of my firsties?”

Itachi stops his eyes from narrowing. Again with the defensive reaction. Frank knows what’s going on with the boy, and is touchy about it. Whatever the situation is, it must be connected to prejudice they all think he shares.

“Yes,” he says, keeping emotion from his voice. “I already spoke to Lady McGonagall about it, and she assures me the boy’s parents aren’t abusing him. I have some doubts about it, still, but I am not the right person to keep an eye out for him. The child is underfed, skittish, friendless and kept at a distance by his peers. You are perfectly placed to help him.”

The guarded expression cracks and peels off Frank's face, and a crooked little smile creeps in its place. "I can confirm Lupin isn't abused. I've met his parents, as it happens. They're fine people."

Itachi raises an eyebrow. "I'm sure. Moving on, there is Severus Snape, who also comes from a troubled home. There is only so much anyone can do to shield him from his classmates' *attention*, but I have done what I can to help. Shafiq Heiress is somewhat amenable to helping but you would be a decent addition. Three Ancient and Noble Heirs would go a long way at levelling things somewhat."

"Right," says Frank, smile spreading into a wide grin. "Sure, I will do what I can. I have a few connections in Slytherin."

Itachi takes in a deep breath. Now comes the important part.

"But, really," he says, meeting Frank's eye, imparting every bit of pathetic pleading he can. "It's Fawley that is the biggest problem child. The boy is *impossibly foolish*."

Frank looks like he is holding in his laugh with herculean efforts. "That would be the boy who got himself a detention on the first night? Who keeps calling you out?"

Itachi narrows his eyes. "He is suicidally reckless," he says, maybe a touch petulantly. "I can ignore him most of the time, but he called the Shafiq Heiress a slimy traitor in class! The Shafiq Heiress, Frank!"

Frank hiccups, getting a bit red around the ears.

"It's not funny! I only managed to appease her because she was more interested in squeezing me for information. The boy is a Half-blood, Frank, there are only so many times he can sneer at the wrong person before word gets out and Aunt Cassie does something we all regret."

“It’s a little funny,” says Frank. “He is so—like a little snarling bunny—”

“Just talk to him, would you? I get that nobody expected me to be a Hufflepuff, but it is a bad time to be calling out a Black. My family is gearing for a fight, and they won’t be reasonable.”

Frank sobers a little, but his eyes are still dancing with humour. “I don’t know what you expect me to do. The boy has a vendetta. I am also a Pureblood Heir, you know. Anything I say would make him cry favouritism the more.”

“Someone has to do it,” he tries again.

“Alright, how about this? I don’t particularly care,” Frank says, with a complicated glint in his eyes. “I will do my duty to the school, but I have niftier nifflers to catch than one irritating child with a chip on their shoulder. Lupin and Snape don't deserve their situation, I wholly agree. Fawley does.”

Itachi pauses and considers for perhaps the first time, the whole of the man talking to him. Sweet or not, Frank is a Pureblood Heir, born and raised.

“Alright,” he says, resigned to the cool notes his voice drops to. “A trade, then. What can this Heir offer to the House Longbottom?”

Frank blinks once, twice, before the tension is broken. “I swear, you bring out the worst in me. I can’t believe you’d offer a serious trade for that brat. Fine, okay. No trades. A favour, in good faith, me to you. I will speak to your problem child once. After he spits in my face I will wash my hands of the whole sorry affair and feed him to Lady Potter myself.”

Nice try. Itachi’s back is up now, and while Frank is good, he’s nowhere near as good as Riddle. Itachi might have been caught up in the relative harmlessness of the children, but he certainly knows better. Baby crocodiles are still predators, no matter how cute they might appear.

He smiles, wide and insincere. It's not that he doesn't appreciate Frank; he does, very much. His mask is excellent, and the game he plays with the world is fascinating in its complexity. He is even confident of his good nature. But he is dangerous, and it's time to acknowledge that.

"I do apologise—I've been taking up time with my requests. But there is a conversation to be had, isn't there? You're not here out of the goodness of your heart. So, what is it you need House of Black for?"

Frank blinks at him, mimicking confusion fairly well, but it's a bit late for that, now.

"I want a third option," he says when he concludes Itachi is not buying it. "You are something new, and I am sick of the old. I don't appreciate the fact I can predict the next hundred years of my House."

Fair enough.

Itachi inclines his head. "We are Neutral. Grey, if we must resort to banal metaphors. I will not tie my House to either one of the sinking ships, you understand." He leans forward, letting some of his cruelty shine. "And I know they are sinking because, on the off chance they avoid imploding, I will sink them myself."

Frank blinks, not having expected Itachi to show his teeth, probably. Well, now, what did you expect? You can't open by throwing a misguided child to the wolves and expect the playing field to remain all daisies and roses.

"Noted," he says. "Longbottoms are Light, but the current *us versus them* mentality is only harming *us*, as far as I can see. I want to keep my House relevant and that, currently, means you."

"House Black would welcome you as a friend, I'm sure." He pauses for a moment to gather his thoughts. Hmm. He will need some new terminology. "That's how we are going to

operate, I think. Friends instead of allies. In the interest of, ah, transparency," he adds, "I am working on making one Lord Riddle a friend of my House."

"Riddle?" Frank blinks at him with, as far as he can tell, honest confusion. "I can't say I know the name."

Oh, you sweet summer child.

"He's one of ours," he says, taking pity on him. "Dark Purebloods, I mean."

"Right." The puzzled furrow between his brows deepens. "Blacks are a Dark House. *The* Dark House. I would not expect you to change your alliances."

Itachi's lips twitch at that. Riddle is many things, but he's hardly a backer of the status quo. He is a politician only in the sense that he has a following. Other than that, the man would be more comfortable with a beating heart in his teeth than in a meeting.

"Just a heads up, between friends. With that said, I can't commit anything, until the business with the trial is finished, you understand."

Frank looks at him with an unreadable expression, long moments trickling by. "It is entirely possible," he says slowly, "that you know a lot more about our political situation than I do. I did not expect my House will need serious alliances for a good few years yet."

The unexpected rejoinder shocks him from the professional bent his mind fell into. Huh. Frank isn't looking for an out in the upcoming war. He is looking for someone to go to Wizengamot with, bless his little heart.

"It's best to start these things early," he says. "For example, I would like to throw you a Coming-of-Age event at Castle Black in May."

“Pardon?” Frank’s alarmed expression melts into a confused one, which is absolutely a win. “You can’t—That’s not up to you!”

Itachi waves an airy hand. “I already spoke to Grandfather about it, no need to worry. I leave it up to you to convince your Lady Mother, of course.”

“Right, right, Mother…” Frank trails off, visibly gathering his thoughts. “Wait, no, what? How did we even—What are you talking about?”

Itachi’s lips twitch at the outraged expression on Frank’s face. “You want a loud suggestion of an alliance, yes? What better way than to let us throw you an elaborate party?”

Frank looks at him for a long moment. “This is revenge, isn’t it,” he says. “This is revenge for me not wanting to help the blonde pulling your pigtails? You are going to be a whirlwind of chaos until I regret everything, I can already tell.”

“What you’re talking about--”

“Dear, before I forget,” he says, as he starts recognising the area as being near Hufflepuff dorms. “I came across a term I am unfamiliar with in my reading. You don’t happen to be familiar with the Path of Jelena?”

Frank sends him a surprised look, both eyebrows raised. “Of course I am.” He says. “Jelena Agapova was the most famous champion for Witches’ wellbeing, in, well, the world. Famous healer. What few witches made it through the Trials in Eastern Europe owe it to her."

Oh wow, okay. “And the Path is—”

“She travelled from her birthplace in Belovodye, through Eastern Europe, Balkans, western Europe, Scandinavia and back. Healers—real, dedicated Healers—walk the same path she had, to honour her and continue her work. Why do you ask?”

“Professor Woodward. She walked the Path.”

Frank gapes. “No.” He says, voice full of wonder. “Really? Our Herbology Professor?”

“Oh yes. Twice, even.”

“Wow.” He shakes his head as if to clear it. “That’s a big deal. That’s—I don’t think more than perhaps one person every year starts on the path. It’s long, lonely work with very strict rules. You have to help and heal all magic folk you come across, never demanding payment. You have to teach and offer what wisdom you have to any who would wish to learn. It’s holy. Sacred. To have walked it twice—”

The more he listens, the more impressed he is with his Head of House. It does sound sacred, in fact. In the Elemental Nations, monks often underwent similar pilgrimages. Rarely did those trips focus on healing others rather than self-improvement.

“She is frightfully competent. Hogwarts has an impressive staff. “

“Merlin. There can’t be more than a hundred healers alive who walked the Path once, never mind twice. It’s—I best start paying more attention to her lectures. How do you even know about this?”

He smiles a little, letting some of the self-deprecating chagrin show. “Paranoia, I’m afraid. I asked my Lord Grandfather to look into my Head of House. She is a formidable witch. I was terrified.”

Frank looks at him like he lost every single ounce of sense. “Professor Woodward. The quiet, unassuming, apolitical Professor Woodward?”

“Professor Woodward who fought in the Grindelwald Wards as a frontline medic,” he says sweetly. “Professor Woodward, who would have gone against Lord Black if she thought I wasn’t ready to start Hogwarts this year? That Professor Woodward? I’m still terrified, Frank, and so should you be.”

“I’m starting to get that impression, yes. Alright, then, I’m off to revise my Herbology essay, Merlin save me. Merry part.”

“Merry part.”

Dear Sirius,

Healer Rosier has agreed to meet with you on Saturdays and Sundays at 18.00. Lady McGonagall has agreed, pending the approval of the Headmaster. Expect a not-too-subtle interrogation.

Life continues to be busy. Dorea and Cassie send their regards. I would watch for their retaliation. Lady Potter especially does not appreciate the admin work. Cassie, on the other hand, is both thrilled and furious. I had to bribe her with valuable secrets to stop her from being carried to and from the Wizengamot by scantily dressed young men.

Don’t read the press unless you have to. Remember to stay above reproach. I am told your Professors, barring Slughorn, are impressed by your performance and comportment. Keep it up and I am buying you and Regulus a surprise present for Yule.

Keep safe, keep vigilant,

Arcturus

He reads the letter once, twice, three times.

“Is Grandfather—alright,” he says, confused.

“He is healthy,” Kreacher says. Itachi absolutely knows his cagey tone when he hears it.

“Good to know. What is going on?”

“He is worried, little star.” Kreacher spreads his long fingers through Itachi's hair slowly. His eyes fall shut. “The news-wizards write disgusting articles about you. The demand is such, they print several editions. Our Regulus is hit hard, not just by what happened, but by what is in the paper. It is expected that Lord Black is under stress.”

“Ah. Yes, well. Fair enough.”

Dear Grandfather,

I gather by the tone of your letter you are operating with too little sleep and too much worry. Please, try and rest a bit more. I assure you, I am the most comfortable Black in all the lands. The children are welcoming, the staff are beyond reproach, and Kreacher brings me the news.

Thank you for organising my mind-healing sessions. I look forward to them. My physical condition is improving by the day.

The newspaper interests me not at all. So far none of the children have confronted me about it, so I see no reason to change that. I wonder about the state of the land when I am the most important thing to talk about, but it is, in the end, without consequence.

Give my well wishes to Aunt Cassie. Frank is going to start attending the Wizengamot meetings next year, and I look forward to introducing him. That will be an explosive meeting, that I will take great pleasure in. Please inform Aunt Dorea that I have made contact with Heir Potter and that he is everything I could have expected and more.

All my love, as always, goes to Regulus. Please, inform me when you think my letters would be appreciated. I have much to tell him. He will rule this school in a few short years.

Your grandson,

Sirius Black

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Lily

(Thursday, 9th September, 1971)

“You stop right there.”

Itachi and the gaggle of badgers that have somehow become his—Timothy, Young and Clarke—stop in their tracks.

Amaterasu, what now? He has managed to keep himself from any real anger, so far, and this foolishness isn’t doing much to prolong that comfortable state of affairs. First trickles of heat swirl low in his belly. Whoever is behind this barely escaped with their life. Itachi’s hand is already wrapped around the hilt of a knife.

He gathers his composure as best he can and turns around to deal with the blight on an otherwise pleasant Thursday.

The redheaded pseudo-Uzumaki girl is stomping their way, so reminiscent of Sasuke’s Uzumaki that it almost takes his breath away. Long hair flows around her as she moves. Her bone structure is too strong to fit the Purebelood ideal, but the vibrancy is enchanting.

Now, what has enraged this little dragon this much?

“You—Black.” Of course it’s him, Lady wept.

Timothy and Young audibly swallow down laughter. Clarke, however, looks almost as displeased as Itachi feels. More, even. Itachi has known the golden-eyed fawn to be sweet-tempered, free with kind, demure words. Even Fawley hasn't nudged him from determined serenity.

Not anymore. Clarke—Andrew, he really should call him Andrew by now—steps into the path of the furious girl without a moment's hesitation, and Young—Noah—wheezes out another laugh. "Oh, no," Noah says under his breath. "Oh, this will be bad. 'Drew can be catty as anything when he's riled."

"Excuse you," says Clarke, voice laced with enough frost to halt a grown man in his tracks. "That is no way to speak to a classmate."

"Budge over, pretty boy," says the girl, dismissing him. Brave, Itachi thinks, but foolish. "I have a snob to put in place."

"And you think I will—what? Let you harass my friend like the wildling you are? Please." He adds a derisive sneer for effect. If Itachi didn't know any better, he'd think the boy was a Noble brat. Since this little event is unravelling in front of the Great Hall, they're amassing quite the audience. He can see the approving looks coming Clarke's way from Purebloods and Halfbloods alike.

"Listen, I don't know who you are, and I don't particularly care about whatever crush you're nursing. Black has been harassing my friend and that stops now. So move away."

One day. One day of peace. Is that too much to ask?

Apparently. The drama is not only shocking, it's rapidly escalating. The implication wasn't subtle, and Clarke is a Halfblood. He can't afford the suggestion of improper behaviour. The girl, a proudly working-class Muggleborn, probably doesn't know it. But that, as is so often the case, helps nobody.

He needs to de-escalate this quickly. Well. *Somebody* needs to de-escalate this, not him. He is still digesting the unexpected shot of adrenaline, *and* he might be a bit too protective of his

three badgers. The fact of the matter is, Clarke will have to do some fast talking, because of one misguided child with more courage than sense. That's not easy to let go.

"*Quiet*," he says, voice sharp with irritation. "It is obvious the Lady is not willing to have a civil discussion. We need a mediator. Young, if you would be so kind as to fetch Heir Longbottom? Since the Lady is a lion, it is appropriate."

"Now wait just one moment, you arrogant little snot—"

"Clarke—Andrew," he says, ignoring the redhead as best he can. "Thank you for your help. You are a better friend than I deserve. Nevertheless, you need not bother yourself with this."

The fawn blinks his enormous golden eyes at him once, twice, three times, before a tense little smile quirks his lips. "I'm hardly going to leave you with that girl." The last word is punctuated with a dainty little sniff. It causes a ripple of rather mean-spirited laughter from the Pureblood parts of the crowd. Lady help them, they have a *crowd*. It's not even a question of how; why is this his life?

Indeed the girl flushes, pales and flushes again. Her courage helps her to power through the embarrassment, but even an adult would find this situation daunting. Some children would be scarred by it.

"I'm sure the Lady and myself will have a perfectly civil conversation with Heir Longbottom as the mediator. With that said, you are, as always, welcome to stay if you prefer."

"So smooth," says Timothy from his spot behind his right shoulder. "I swear to God, Sirius, it will never not be funny to watch you stumble into ridiculous drama without even trying."

He suppresses a sigh and sends a tight smile the girl's way. "Miss Evans, was it," he says. "Merry meet. I am Sirius Black."

“I know who you are,” she snaps. “If you expect me to be scared by your family and your money, you have another thing coming.”

“Right.” He closes his eyes and inhales a long, bracing breath. This has to be about Snape. How, though? Itachi has been a *kitten* to Snape. He’s been gentler with Snape than he has been with anyone not sharing half of his DNA.

“Chin up,” whispers Timothy, all sorts of amused. “Your big, burly knight is coming to rescue you from the big bad.”

“Oh thank Merlin,” he whispers back. “I can’t handle this. I only wanted dinner.”

“You can handle this just fine. Especially since ‘Drew is halfway to scratching her eyes out.”

“Lady wept.”

“Merry meet,” says Frank, swallowing the distance between them with long steps. Young half-walks half-runs behind him, burgundy hair flashing gold in the candlelight. “What’s all this, then? Young Master Young informed me I am needed as a mediator?”

Oh, Merlin—that was a joke. He thinks that’s funny.

Ignoring the horrible thing pretending to be a joke, he inclines his head. “Merry meet, Frank. Noah has indeed called you at my urging. Thank you, Noah. Miss Evans has decided to start a somewhat charged conversation with me and my companions. I thought it best to secure an impartial overseer.”

“The girl shouted at us like we were dogs,” Andrew snaps. “Like she was calling us to heel. I will not stand for it. Whatever delusions she lives in are not my concern.”

Oh, dear.

Frank seems to share his concern because he claps his hands twice. “Alright, firsties. Here’s what we’re going to do. Evans, Clarke, Black and—what is your name, badger three?”

“Timothy. Timothy Warnock. Umm. Merry meet?”

“Merry meet, Master Warnock.” Because he must be outrageous, always, Frank adds a gloriously scandalous bow to the Muggleborn. “You look like you have a good head on your shoulders. You join too. We’re going to go sit inside an empty classroom and talk this out. Evans, do you want anyone to come with you?”

“I don’t need anyone to hold my hand,” she says, with a decent attempt at a sneer. Itachi can see how much she’d like to call on one or two of the Gryffindor girls standing around.

“Of course you don’t,” says Frank with a little exhaustion poking through. “Still. Fortescue—you were here, yes? Saw the whole thing?” He waits for the girl-child to nod her head before scanning the crowd some more. “Gill—how about yourself? Alright, perfect. Three Gryffindors and three Hufflepuffs, it’s all nice and fair. Alright. Off we go, kiddies.”

Dazed by the sheer randomness of everything that transpired, Itachi lets himself be led by Timothy. Similarly, The Gryffindors follow Frank like ducklings. He sits them down in a classroom on the smaller side, with one large square table for twenty.

“Alright. I understand this, whatever else it may be, is a misunderstanding. I am not here to hand out punishments but to make sure the tone of the conversation remains civil.”

Clarke scoffs but doesn’t insist, which Itachi is damn grateful for. He doesn’t need to stir up his more unhinged impulses, and he’s never at his best when he feels one of his own is slighted.

“That’s right,” says Timothy. “It’s all a giant misunderstanding, I’m sure. Still—our Siri is a very by-the-books type of boy. He likes to be proper about these things.”

Amaterasu, but this is weird. “Before we continue, if I may, introductions are in order,” Itachi says, keeping his tone as even as possible.

The girlchildren introduce themselves. Alice Fortescue and Julie Gill are, well, eleven-year-old children; Half-bloods he’d assume. Fortescue looks to be a Wizarding name though so—who knows? It’s very like Frank to deliberately make sure there is no suspicion of Pureblood privilege. Especially when the conflict is between a blatant Muggleborn and a blatant Pureblood.

“Merry meet, Miss Gill, Miss Fortescue, Miss Evans.”

“Alright, if that’s done,” explodes Evans. “If we can stop kissing up to the snob, please, that would be swell.”

Andrew sneers and puffs up, very much like a golden-eyed, dark-skinned owlet.

“Is that the tone you want to set, Evans,” says Timothy, nothing but curiosity in his eyes. “We’re all classmates here.”

“Excuse me if I have a problem with a jerk harassing my friend for days,” she snaps back, undaunted. “He keeps putting Severus on the spot, making him uncomfortable. I'm not going to let him, just because he’s the son of someone rich.”

Ouch. He raises an eyebrow, cooling a little. “I have been nothing but cordial to Master Snape. I do not appreciate the insinuation. Your intervention is neither warranted nor well-executed.”

She scoffs, tossing her hair to great effect. “He can’t say no, can he? He’s already having a hard time in Slytherin, and the last thing he needs is you mucking about, throwing your

weight around with the rest of them."

"First of all, how dare you—" says Andrew, before forcibly biting down on the rest of that sentence.

Itachi takes a moment to leash his frustration as tight as he can. Similarly, Frank observes the drama with a sort of baffled surprise, like he can't quite believe his eyes and ears.

"Evans, look," says Timothy. "You seem like a nice enough girl, and like you care for your friend a lot. Do you think this is helping him? I was there every time Siri spoke to your friend. He wasn't rude or disrespectful. Sirius loves potions, and your friend is ace at potions. I don't know what your plan was, but all you did was make a scene."

She huffs at him, but Itachi thinks he sees a hint of uncertainty underneath all the bravado.

"Alright, I admit I didn't have to shout," she allows. "But it's not okay. Sev is not—Every time Mr High and Mighty speaks to him, his housemates descend. He can't say anything, because of whatever inter-House drama the snakes are playing, so he has to suffer in silence."

"So your plan is—what? To get Siri to stay away," Timothy asks with, to Itachi's mind, a very appropriate note of incredulity.

"Yes." She nods, determined and righteous.

Something snaps in Itachi.

"Get over yourself," he says, feeling like he's having an out-of-body experience. "You know so very little about the world you and your friend now live in. You don't know the first thing about the problems Severus Snape is facing. More to the point, perhaps: you, little girl, cannot make me do a single damn thing. Not a one."

His voice has grown low, almost cruel. He doesn't like hearing it. He can't stop himself, it seems.

"I suggest in the future, you try asking, first. Read something. Educate yourself. Then decide on a course of action." He clasps his hands together, to stop them from shaking. "And, of course, if you have a problem with me express it without insulting my badgers."

He finishes talking and floats back into awareness. Damn. That was not entirely warranted. The girl-child is pale and leaning back into her chair as far as it would go. Timothy's hand is on his shoulder and Clarke looks at him like he's never seen him before. His saving grace is that neither of his friends looks in any way afraid.

"Well, okay then," says Frank, loud in the silence. "That was exciting. And weird. You're a strange batch of first-years. So. Since I was here to make sure everything was above board, I'm going to go ahead and call it a night. Black—you need to eat. Evans—you're off the hook this time. Chop-chop."

"Kitchens," he tells his badgers, exhausted.

"Yeah. Sure. Kitchens."

"Soo—"

Merlin, it's becoming almost a tradition. Every day, Itachi does something stupid, and every day Timothy waits until they're somewhere private to make sense of it. Itachi is learning a lot about healthy communication.

"I know. I apologise." He grimaces, a bit uncertain as to what, exactly, he is apologising for. "I was out of line."

“I mean. Maybe?” Timothy's lips twist into a conflicted line. “It was a lot, but I can't say I am surprised.”

“Really?” Itachi blinks at the two boys sitting across from the little table the elves set up for them. “I was hardly charitable to the girl.”

“She was out of line first,” says Andrew. The boy is tense, angry, vindicated and a whole lot more. When did Andrew become the most vindictive of his children? “And no, nobody is surprised that you got offended by her dragging us into it.”

Well. That’s adorable.

“Are you good, ‘Drew,” asks Timothy. “I am focusing on Siri’s Lord Of Darkness moment, but you got real angry, real quick. You know she didn’t mean to insult you?”

Andrew clenches his teeth so hard, Itachi spends a long moment being grateful skele-gro is a thing here. “Nobody gets to speak to me like that,” he says after a long, tense moment. “I don’t care what she intended. Preston is one thing, and even he never brought the rest of us into his nonsense.”

“To be fair, he did go after that girl—Esfir,” says Timothy, edging close enough to Andrew throw a soothing hand over his shoulder.

“Shafiq can damn well take care of herself,” he bites out, echoing Itachi’s thoughts perfectly. “My family can’t. My sister works in the Ministry.”

Well, shit.

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Itachi says, meeting Andrew’s eyes. “You won’t get any backlash from our side. Not any more than you would just for associating with me at all.”

“Right.” Andrew pastes a smile on his face that looks painful. “I’m sure your Lord is thrilled about rumours of his heir dallying with a muggle-raised Halfblood.”

“Alright,” says Timothy, a note of alarm audible in his voice. “First of all, the word *dallying* is gross and you should never use it. Second of all, I know you all take your, I don’t know, reputations seriously, but this is ridiculous. Siri would never let anything happen to you. You saw what happened when someone went after his friendship with the Snape boy, and he doesn’t even like him.”

Despite everything, Itachi feels himself relaxing. It’s so refreshing to be in the company of a healthy, well-adjusted child with a firm grip on reality.

“Timothy is not wrong,” he says. “My position in our House hierarchy is very firm. Grandfather would never go against me in this.”

“See—listen to the maniac. And, really, I feel like this is something we will have to get used to. A lot of people have a problem with our Siri, and a lot of them will take it out on us. You can’t let it get to you.”

Andrew exhales and lets some of the tension bleed out of him. “It’s so frustrating,” he says. “When did everyone forget how ruthless the Purebloods can be on a whim.”

“They didn’t forget, they just don’t know,” says Timothy. “I don’t know if we’re honest. I know that everyone steps lightly around Shafiq and Morgan. I see the whole thing Slytherins have about Siri where they hang on his every word and want to crawl inside his skin. It's abstract, though. We don’t have anything like that.”

“Imagine if Prince Charles went to your school,” Andrew says, a little grim. “Only more ‘cause the Royals are ornamental in the Muggle world. That’s Sirius; literal royalty. And since the laws here are different, once you’re the Heir, you have a lot of first-hand power; age doesn’t come into it.”

“Woah,” says Timothy, looking at Itachi like he can’t quite reconcile this with the image he had in his head.

“It’s complicated.” What an understatement. “Andrew is right; I could do a lot of damage if I wanted to. That said, doing so would be very stupid of me, in the long run. I am in Hogwarts, to try and clean up our image. Evans, as silly as she was, could do a lot of damage to me.”

“Not as much as you could do to her,” says Andrew. “Which is my point. I don’t think you would go there. I like you—you’re my friend. But I’m not blind. I spent years learning the rules, and it’s—frustrating to see kids breaking them left and right.”

“Jesus Christ,” says Timothy, softly, like it was punched out of him. “Sorry—that was insensitive of me. Sorry.”

“Pardon?” Itachi says.

Discomfort flashes over Timothy's face, settling in the downturned corners of his lips. “Umm. I read that magicals aren't okay with Christianity. Which, yeah, totally understandable—”

Itachi blinks at the flustered boy, as warmth spreads from his ribcage through his limbs, pooling in his fingers and toes. “That is very considerate of you. I don’t mind, though. Please, when we’re in private, feel free to observe whatever rituals you find enlightening.”

Andrew huffs a small, strangled laugh. “That wasn’t prayer, that was like, an expression. Like we would say *Merlin's beard*.”

“Oh.” He sends another smile at Timothy who is steadily blushing more and more. “My point stands. I will help you find a place to observe your religious practices. We’re what you would call polytheists, but my family worships Lady Hectate.”

“You’re *religious*?”

Itachi raises an eyebrow. It's a strange way of phrasing it. How could he not be? The hand of the supernatural is felt strongly in this world, even more so than in the Elemental Nations. Which says a lot.

"Never mind," says Andrew. "Let's leave that discussion for another day, shall we? It's getting, late, I'm exhausted and Noah is probably tearing his hair out in worry."

Timothy gasps, dramatic and adorable. "Not his gorgeous hair! Anything but the hair!"

Itachi nods solemnly and goes back to choking down the barely flavoured chicken. Young's hair was truly marvellous.

"Before we leave." Merlin, he doesn't want to talk about *anything* for a month. He's so over these petty dramas and pointless circular arguments… "I need some—outside perspective. What she said, with Snape. You don't think she's right? That I'm causing problems for the boy?"

"Absolutely not," Timothy says without hesitation. It's encouraging that Timothy—very much an outsider to all this petty posturing—is so very certain. "I don't know why you chose Snape of all kids; he's scary, rude and a bit mean. That said, it's a good thing, for him. Slytherins have this eerie fascination with you, so they've been treating him better."

Anthony makes a dismissive sound in his throat, hand flicking sharply. "He's the only muggle-raised Halfblood in Slytherin. Don't listen to her. She doesn't know what she's talking about."

Itachi sighs a little, fond and exhausted. "Fine. Great. Super. Let's go, then. I need to see a bed, and I need to see it now."

The thing is, Hogwarts is never peaceful. Itachi is handling things as they come, but it's still a lot. Every day, a hundred things surprise him; a thousand individual interactions happen where he's completely out at sea. By the time his vow-bound Mind-healer floos into Professor Woodward's office, he's desperately in need of an outlet. A nice, bloody spar would be ideal. (A nice, bloody battlefield would be ideal.) With how weak he is, mentally, physically and magically, this will have to do.

"Healer Rosier." Lady McGonagall bobs her head in a brisk bob, echoed by Professor Woodward. There is a touch of personality there, a spark of a connection. Interesting. Understandable--Healer Rosier is young enough to have been taught by the Professors—but interesting.

"Merry meet, Professors. Merry meet, Heir Black."

"Merry meet, Healer Rosier." He tries for a smile. "Please, call me Sirius."

"My honour," says the healer. "Do you have a space for us, Lady McGonagall? Preferably one we can use in the future?"

"Right this way."

The healer is merciless. Whatever he had expected, this wasn't it. This was more in the lane of the Yamanaka, only without the constant threat of lobotomy.

The healer swore on his magic he will not reveal anything he learned in these meetings and proceeded to drag him in and out of topics Itachi wouldn't dream of touching. His father, his mother. His Grandfather. His position in life. His fears. The only thing he left alone—for now—is Regulus. Since that would have earned him a knife to the throat, that's for the best.

The second hour is spent working on something called Occlumency, which looks to be the most useful branch of magic he's encountered yet. Not the most interesting—that's wizard-

space—or the most pleasant—that's charms— but definitely most useful. He hadn't thought there was a field of mind-magic, but now that he knows it to be a threat, he can barely think of anything else.

"How was it," asks Timothy, warm and bouncy as always. Itachi's mind-healing sessions are something of an open secret in Hufflepuff House, and it's been phenomenal PR to boot. Even Fawley didn't do anything but nod. If he has to have an evil maniac sharing his Dorm, he's at least happy the maniac is working on being workably sane.

Itachi grunts as he slides into the nearest soft surface close to a heat source.

"That good, huh?"

Busy with wriggling his body as far into the cushions as it can go, he ignores the little pest. "Take one look at me," he says, voice muffled by the pillow he is mushed into. "And guess how many mommy issues I have. Go ahead. I'll wait."

Timothy wheezes, a short, startled burst of sound. "That's, ah. Not many?"

"A pathetic attempt." He moves his head just enough to crack one eye open and glare at the boy. "Many, is the right answer. They are many and varied. And the damn Healer had me talk about it. My mother, Timothy."

"I—ugh. I—have cream puffs? For you?"

Itachi freezes, every muscle tensing as he rises from behind the pillows to focus on the child. "Cream puffs?"

"I am going to get them."

Timothy backs off, torn between panic and laughter, letting Itachi collapse into his pseudo-nest. On one hand, he shouldn’t eat sugar. On the other hand—Walburga Black.

Whatever cream puffs are, he will demolish them.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Free--

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Monday, September 13th, 1971)

The Snape Situation resolves itself by virtue of an unspoken agreement to never mention it. If Snape wanted to discuss it, he didn’t show it in any way. Itachi, of course, would rather stab his eyes out than embroil himself further in pre-teen drama. No, they resume their semi-professional relationship. Itachi learns about potions and deters Slytherins from harassing the Halfblood. The redhead stays away from him. It's all very reasonable.

With that said, the Slytherin part of the equation isn't as robust as he'd like. The snake House as a whole doesn’t know what to make of him. Their parents had instructed the children to be wary, but that will only take him so far. The facts are against him, here. His badgers are either Muggleborn or Halfblood, and he hasn't crushed Fawley or, now, Evans. An enterprising Slytherin will challenge him sooner or later, and he has no idea if he is capable of scaling down his response.

Merlin, but he dreads that moment. His method of ‘de-escalate up to a point and then escalate as far as conceptually possible’ will not serve him well. It will likely result in a traumatised child, a boatload of guilt, and a suspension from Hogwarts. (It will result in a dead child, but he tries not to think about that.)

It hasn’t even been a month. It hasn’t even been *half* a month, Amaterasu preserve him.

The second Monday at Hogwarts begins inauspiciously.

The inciting incident, the terrible snowflake that starts the avalanche of chaos, only lasts about a second. He is finishing the slightly less terrible but still aggressively underwhelming breakfast when a fire-god flames into reality, drops a letter next to his plate and disappears.

Heart-rate having been kicked into a gallop, Itachi stills his body and does his best to wait it out. It's—What—A fire-bird just—

He inhales a long, shuddering breath, closes his eyes and dips into a meditative sequence. He's had extensive training; he knows what to do about an inconvenient panic attack.

Breathe. In-out. Feel the movements of your heart, and listen to the evenly spaced breaths. Good.

"—rius, are you okay? Should I call Healer Febru? Siri?"

"No." His voice comes out low and raspy, as if he took sandpaper to his throat. "No, I was only—alarmed. The, ah. Letter. Startled me."

"The letter?" Who—Andrew.

"The firebird. I did not expect it."

Okay. Okay. His heart slows bit by excruciating bit until he's left sitting in a puddle of cold sweat, ears ringing, a piercing headache making it difficult to think.

"The Headmaster has a phoenix familiar." Andrew again. "He's famous for it."

Now hold on one damn minute. “I will call out anyone who thinks they own an immortal firebird.” His voice is much improved, it has to be said. Now it comes across as strangled, instead of shredded.

Andrew huffs. “Do you want to argue about terminology? You nearly collapsed on your breakfast, and you want to discuss the inappropriate applications of the word *own*?”

Well. “I always want to discuss inappropriate applications of the word *own*, to tell you the truth.”

Timothy snorts without any real humour. “Got it, you weirdo. Now eat. You have some smoked salmon still, and best believe I’m eating your leftovers.”

The salmon is delicious—one bright spot in an otherwise plain meal. His badgers have noticed his feelings on the matter and haven’t stopped mentioning it since. Many a cat simile has been made, especially if the fish is served with cream and dill.

“Here.”

A cream puff graces the plate set in front of him, round and perfect. Timothy bribed an older student to cast preserving charms on the box, which he now carries with him at all times as an incentive or a reward. It’s both effective and endearing; Itachi is already planning a suitably grand present for Yule as repayment.

With a love-struck sigh, he devours the slice of pillowy delight.

“That will never get dull,” says Young. *Noah*. “You’re so over the top about everything.”

They’re distracting him, the lambs, and giving him the space to relax into the performance of a clueless noble. Not being an idiot, he grabs the distraction and runs with it. “First of all, I am savouring a gift by a most thoughtful young Gentlewizard. Second of all, Lady Warnock

prepared these, as you well know. Lady Warnock, Noah. Prepared my food. Excuse me for taking the time to bask in the honour."

"For pity's sake." The slight whine in Timothy's voice matches the embarrassed but pleased flush to his cheeks. "Will you stop being in love with my mother's brain? It's weird, Siri, it's so weird."

"Do you know how many Wizarding ethicists there are in England today? Zero, that's how many. Now, I'm not saying Muggle ethics apply perfectly—or even very well—to the Magical world, but their thinkers are centuries ahead of us."

"You're just a massive nerd," says Andrew. He's playing up his exasperation, but there is honest humour there too. The boy is a decent actor, well beyond his peers, but Itachi has adult privileges. "Sorry, Tim, no offence to your mum, but I've never seen a kid be obsessed with something as boring as philosophy."

"It's weird, is what it is. And it's always mum, too. Dad is a philosopher too, and he—"

"He's a what now," says Itachi, not even playing at this point. "Your father? Master Warnock?"

Timothy blushes even brighter and groans under his breath. "I can't believe I said that. What type of an idiot just—Yes, Siri. My dad is a philosopher, too. He's a Professor at Oxford."

Itachi leans forward, making his eyes big and soulful. "And you've never said? Aren't you proud?"

"No—no," snaps Timothy. "I did not fall for this last time, and I'm not falling for this now. Yes, he teaches Philosophy. No, I'm not going to tell you more about it 'cause I honestly don't understand the first thing about it. Something about language, I don't know."

“Is he published too? Do you have any of his books I could find?” He’s overdoing it but not by much. Philosophy is a fascinating show of human ingenuity and one of the biggest differences between worlds. Thinking changed very slowly in the Elemental Nations, and just slightly faster in the Magical world. In the Muggle world, though, there are hundreds if not thousands of schools of thought about everything from political systems to one’s relationship with one’s self-concept.

“I think so? He’s not like mum, though. He’s more, like, old-school. Academic papers and that.”

“Timothy,” he says, all earnestness. “I must read them. I must. Any man found worthy by your mother must be a phenomenal thinker. Think of it as educating the next generation of political actors. Do you want a morally bankrupt Noble voting in laws and regulations?”

“I’ve completely lost control of the conversation,” says Timothy. “Fine, you nuisance. I will do you one better. Come visit me over the hols, and I will give you a hand-picked set of works by both of them, and you get to pick their brains over dinner or something.”

Itachi blinks, shaken out of his whimsical head-space. A wave of anxiety makes words stick in his throat. “You would—invite me to your home?” Why would he even— “I appreciate the gesture, but we can meet in a restaurant or a museum. You don’t have to—I mean—”

“Is this a cultural thing,” Timothy asks after a beat of silence on the other side of awkward. “Did I, I don’t know, propose?”

“No,” says Andrew. “He is anxious because he’s the Heir of a notoriously Dark House and you are inviting him into your Muggle home. Well. Old families don’t invite people over willy-nilly because of the Wards, but yeah, it’s ‘cause you’re you and he’s him.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Timothy pauses again, chewing on this, while Itachi tries not to combust out of acute anxiety. It would be one thing if he were embarrassed. He is far too old and insane to let that stuff

bother him much. Kindness, however, is a different beast. Timothy is far kinder to him than he deserves. All his badgers shouldn't be near anything as blood-soaked as Itachi.

"So, I'm not going to ignore this because it's made you very upset. I do invite you to my house, no matter who your parents are. Or your family, whatever. We can talk about it later, though."

"Later, then," he says, with a smile so mechanical he feels like a wind-up toy from Suna. "Thank you nevertheless."

Mood throughly ruined he turns to the letter. He might as well, right?

Dear Mr. Black,

Please join me and your Head of House at the Headmaster's tower, today at 19.30. Some developments have occurred regarding the ongoing investigation regarding the events of August 30th.

Yours sincerely

Albus Dumbledore

He stares at the piece of parchment unblinkingly for two solid minutes, trying to glean more information. What new information could they have uncovered? The case is clear-cut. At most, they can judge Itachi had reacted with disproportionate force. Considering the circumstances, their respective ages, and the use of an Unforgivable, this is hard to imagine.

Another thing that springs to mind is how casual the message is. Terrifying power moves aside, the note isn't written on official school stationery, but on a piece of parchment. There is no lengthy array of titles. Just—Albus Dumbledore.

Itachi is too old and jaded to think the Headmaster didn't know exactly what message he was sending when he had a bird-god deliver his post. Is he trying to infer his authority? I have no need for titles, the subtext appeared to say. Everybody knows who I am. And, just for the sake of the few simpletons who don't, the letter is delivered by a being unencumbered by the circle of life and death.

Or you're reading way too much time into an old eccentric scholar summoning a First Year over for tea. Pull yourself together.

"One moment, please." He cranes his head as best he can—it doesn't improve matters much—until he spots the perfect person. "Merry meet, Prefect Moss. If I may have a moment of your time?"

"Of course, Black," says Moss. He's no less enigmatic now than he was when they were first introduced. He has no friends that Itachi has noticed or even close acquaintances. His interactions with his fellow classmates are crisp, polite and impersonal. "What do you need?"

"I am summoned to the Headmaster's tower tonight at 19.30. If you could escort me, that would be much appreciated."

"That is acceptable. I will collect you after your meal. Is that all?"

He bows to the man—not a boy, not with that level of self-possession. "Thank you, Prefect. Merry part."

He sleepwalks through his classes, to the point even Heir Morgan is sending him slightly worried looks. Timothy is beside himself, and Andrew walks half a step behind him at all

times, like he's worried Itachi will resort to proactive problem-solving and starts stabbing. Himself, possibly.

It's not at all clear to him why he's so rattled. He can't be in real trouble with the law—and Grandfather would strike what few might be stretched to apply. Regulus is safe, or Kreacher would have gotten him already. So—

Moss plucks him from his half-hearted attempt at dinner and escorts him to the Headmaster's tower without bothering with ineffectual conversation. That is a small mercy if nothing else.

The gargoyle is animated. It's not obvious immediately, but it moves very, very slightly. Is it animated rock, or is it an autonomous, inorganic life form? Why not? They have dragons, unicorns and barghests, don't they? Many a magical creature is little more than magic powering a flimsy meat suit.

He bows to it. If gargoyles were anything like Goblins, they don't appreciate human rudeness. "Merry meet, sir. I have an appointment with the Headmaster at 19.30."

The gargoyle ignores him almost well enough that he (it? they?) almost looks inanimate. Which is to say, Itachi does in fact notice the minute twitch of their ear. Alright, then.

With how floaty he was the entire day, it's easy to slip into something of a daze and wait the Headmaster out. If there is a password, neither Moss nor the Headmaster have informed him. If he's late, it's on them. By the time the gargoyle jumps to the side, he's worked past dazed, mellow and disoriented, and ended up numb. It will probably serve him well.

Albus Dumbledore's force of personality hits him like a sledgehammer between the eyes. He slinks inside, a skinny little nothing, held together by spite and neuroses, and freezes in the face of how vibrant the Headmaster is. The physical aspect is bad enough, but his magic and air of vitality can do terrible things to a person. Blacks—and Uchiha—have a thing for power, he thinks with the small part of his mind capable of thought. Having it is, yes, the optimal situation, but being around it is a very acceptable compromise.

He stares at the Headmaster, frozen in the entryway, for—some time. Not too long. Fifteen seconds perhaps? Totally understandable. Reasonable, even. Professor Woodward clears her throat and breaks the daze.

“Oh, I do beg pardon. Merry meet, Headmaster Dumbledore, Professor Woodward, Auror Shacklebolt.” He bows a bit lower than appropriate to make up for the faux pas. His head is spinning.

“Welcome, my boy,” says the Headmaster, a kind—not insincere, he’s pretty sure—smile on his slightly wrinkled face. “Please, come in, take a seat. Lemon drop?”

The seat he’s offered is just about his height, which is a kindness he’s not often afforded. When he sits down, it rises, so he’s not dwarfed by the Headmaster’s desk. Considering the man is about two meters tall, the kindness grows a practical shell.

“Pardon me? Lemond drop?” Why are they so cheerful? The note was, well. Curt. Abrupt. Menacing. Moreover, Itachi is a Black. A malleable, isolated Heir of the premier Dark House is sitting in the Light Lord’s office. This is a good time to inflict a deep and lasting sense of terror.

The Headmaster wiggles his fingers causing a bowl to grow legs and crab-walk his way. Itachi’s lips twitch. What on—

“Is that—candy?”

“Indeed it is, my boy. Muggle confectionary that happens to be my favourite.”

Sugar. There is sugar in his future—

“Mister Black, need I remind you of Healer Febru’s orders?”

Is he prepared to miss the chance to try a new dessert? He rounds his eyes and tilts his head, putting on his most wretched woebegone orphan face. “Surely, Professor, I can try one? How much sugar could one piece contain?”

Professor Woodward spears him with a stern look but relents after a long heartbeat. “Just the one. You have been diligently following the rules. I will not see you break that streak now.”

The candy is an assault on the senses, in a very complex and multilayered way. “This is disgusting, Headmaster,” he says, sending him an amazed look. “What are they called? Can I buy them in Diagon?”

The Headmaster beams at him. “Lemon drops, my boy. I can see they’ve ensnared you as they had me. They are fascinating, are they not?”

Itachi nods furiously. “They combine every negative trait a candy can have, without any of the good ones. It’s cloyingly sweet, but also unpleasantly sour, and it is both too soft to suck and too sticky to chew.”

The words trickle back into his mind, and he pauses for a moment, wondering at the state of the universe. Here he sits, in the seat of power of one of the most influential Wizards alive, and he’s talking about the mouthfeel of muggle candy. He said the word ‘suck’ to Albus Dumbledore.

“Just so my boy. Well phrased. I came across them by accident—”

“Headmaster, I do hate to interrupt,” says Auror Shacklebolt. Ah. Yes. He forgot about Auror Shacklebolt. Itachi’s eyes fall to half mast, and his eyes go cloudy at the sound of the man’s voice.

The part of his mind holding onto cognition with tooth and claws, shrieks in wordless frustration. Go ahead, then. Knock yourself out. The way your life has gone recently, go ahead and lose every molecule of dignity the moment you’re among powerful political figures that will shape your life for years to come. By all means, it seems like a most amusing prospect.

“—going soon. It’s a busy day, as you may be aware.”

Whoops, he zoned out.

“Very well, Auror,” sighs the Headmaster. “If you insist.”

Before his eyes, the image of an affable, insane genius is folded up and tucked away, until an eminently respectable older Gentlewizard sits before him as if he had never been any other way. Itachi blinks at him, fed up with these Wizards and their nonsense. Is this another Frank situation? Is the Headmaster gaslighting the entire world too?

“As much as I would like to talk about more pleasant topics, I am afraid the news is grim. Auror, if you would?”

“Of course. Merry meet, Heir Black.”

Itachi bows as best he can without sitting up. “Heir Shacklebolt.”

“Let me first assure you that your brother and Lord Grandfather are in perfect health, and are only peripherally involved in this matter.”

“Oh thank the Lady.” He exhales a long, controlled breath, tension seeping out of him, until he’s little more than a puddle of barely coherent wizardling.

Auror’s voice warms slightly, before flowing back into the stiff, professional cadence. “Indeed. The situation is relatively simple. Your father, one Orion Black, has passed away early this morning.”

Itachi blinks. Blinks again. And again. Alright? That’s—

“Was he—attacked,” he says, adding a bit of caution to his tone just in case. “Is that the problem? Someone killed him while he was in custody?”

“No. I’m afraid not. He died as a result of his—ah. Injuries.”

A curious sensation bubbles up in his chest. He swallows. Is he upset that he killed his second father? Two out of two? Not—really? Fugaku at least had a reason for his parenting issues; Orion was a psychopath.

“Okay,” he says, letting his tone sound as lost as he feels. “Okay.”

“The reason I’m here, however, is that the details of his departure were leaked to the press.” The Auror’s syrupy voice grows tight with shame. “It will be in the evening Prophet.”

Itachi gives in to the urge and grinds the palms of his hand into his eyes. “I don’t follow the Prophet, Auror Shacklebolt. My Grandfather assures me it will only upset me. Why is this any different?”

“The circumstances of Orion Black’s death were unusual.” Shacklebolt says every word with great care and precision.“We are concerned that, by letting them become public knowledge, we have placed you in grave danger.”

Itachi sends him a level look. “ I will thank you not to exaggerate, Auror Shacklbolt. Remember who brought me up? I know about the gruesome ways magic can kill someone. I stabbed Orion Black with my wand. I didn’t even cast. How noteworthy can that be?”

“I—” the Auror pauses and sends a look at the Headmaster. “Perhaps you might explain, Professor.”

Dumbledore inclines his head, expression neither warm nor cold, long fingers steepled in front of him. “It was noteworthy, Heir Black because you somehow destroyed his ability to channel magic. Since he was a Wizard—an inherently magical being—he could not survive even after his superficial wounds were taken care of.”

“I did no such thing,” he says, confident.

“Mm. I could have phrased that better. You somehow disrupted the internal magic system to the point where he could not retain or direct magic. It would pass through him like a sieve.”

Ouch. That sounds unpleasant.

“Alright,” he says. “If you forgive me for being blunt, but that sounds much better than, say, the Cruciatus. Speaking from experience. “

Many things flicker through Headmaster’s blue eyes, too quickly for him to put a finger on. “I agree with you. The populace will not. Removing magic from a magical person is considered a fate worse than death.”

A muscle jumps in Itachi’s jaw. “Which I hadn’t done.”

“No, I imagine not. I would assume a large and aggressive influx of foreign magic ruptured late Orion Black’s magical core. Academically minded citizens will reach the same conclusions, having read between the lines of the Prophet article informing them at some length that the Heir of House Black can rip magic out of wizards.”

Itachi thinks that over once. Twice. Three times. Finally, he gives up. “Professor,” he says, turning to Professor Woodward, “is this significant? It does not sound significant. It sounds like it’s more of the same. Little Black is coming to eat your babies in the night, etcetera etcetera.”

Professor Woodward sighs like the living embodiment of late autumn; like winds rustling through the bushes and leaves crunching underfoot. “As far as I can tell such things, yes, I would say this is significant. You will be both vilified and courted on the back of this ability. I assure you want nothing to do with either group.”

“The ability I don’t have.”

“Pardon, Black? Do you want to discuss the problems caused by sensationalist press?”

“Alright, alright, fair point.” He settles back into his seat. It’s a comfy chair; he needs all the comfort he can get. “So. What do you want me to do?”

“Do?” Headmaster tilts his head to the side, expression wholly unreadable. “Nothing at all, Heir Black. You need to be aware, and wary. The Aurors and myself will be as vigilant as we can prevent any negative attention that might come to you at the school.”

Uh-huh. Sure. “I should sign something about consenting to my mail being screened?” He’s pretty sure Aunt Cassie spoke to him about those laws and bylaws. Nasty things. “I don’t go anywhere alone anyways, what with being, well, almost dead. Grandfather will want to hire a team—” He waves a vaguely impatient hand. “Private security type thing. One was stationed in my hospital room after the thing. Is private security a thing in Hogwarts?”

The Headmaster brightens the longer Itachi rambles. The crab-bowl click-clacks over the table once more. Professor Woodward caves. “Oh alright, this once. But I will be notifying Healer Febru, and she will adjust your daily potion regime.”

He delights in the lemon drop induced violence happening to his mouth, so much so that Auror Shacklebolt’s words almost pass him by entirely.

“As it happens, Heir Black, your mail is already screened by a team of Aurors, at Lord Black’s request. If we see a notable uptick in more—inappropriate missives, we will negotiate with the School about stationing a team of Aurors temporarily. Other than that, the matter of safety will be largely between you and your instructors. Now, unless you have any further questions, I must return as swiftly as I can.”

“Merry part.” What else. There is something else. “Thank you for letting me know.”

Auror Shacklebolt’s professional expression falters for a moment, brow furrowing. “Please, don’t thank me. This case has been handled poorly. Rest assured, whoever leaked this to the Prophet will be found.”

“Honestly, Heir Shacklebolt, the lack of privacy is not my chief concern right now. Things will settle down.”

The smile he gets for his trouble is small and entirely insincere, but it’s the thought that counts. “Merry part, Heir Black, Professors.”

What now?

“Thank you for not suspending me,” he says after a moment’s pause. “I realize I am complicating your lives.”

The gentle smile on the Headmaster’s face is somewhat undercut by the rage sparking in his eyes. “What kind of a school would we be, if we could not keep one eleven-year-old student from bodily harm? You have been an exemplary student so far. We would not punish you for circumstances outside of your control.”

“I agree,” says Professor Woodward. “You are not a disruptive presence in any meaningful way. Even if we wanted to, we would not have grounds to suspend you.”

He nods, swallowing down a grimace. “Do you expect things to escalate to violence? If it’s just negative media attention, that is easy enough to ignore.”

“This situation is regrettably without precedent,” says the Headmaster. “That having been said, I remain hopeful that you will simply have to abstain from reading the Prophet for the

next few months. That your behaviour disproves the more outlandish claims is to your benefit."

Itachi nods, entirely without a clue how things proceed from here. "I suspect my Grandfather will contact you regarding. The funeral and. My obligations." Okay, so that's concerning. Whenever his sentences start growing this choppy it's time to skedaddle.

"Ah yes—"

Whatever the Headmaster planned to say is interrupted by a whoosh of fire and a not-there melody. Itachi stares, transfixed as between one moment and the next, the god-bird appears on the porch next to the window.

"Ah, Fawkes, what fortuitous timing you have. Meet young Sirius Black, a student at our school. Heir Black, my dear friend Fawkes."

The firebird is bigger than he remembers it. Without the paralysing fear, he can appreciate just how otherworldly the being is.

"Merry meet," he says, voice thin and reedy. "I am honoured."

Fawkes' eyes are, in keeping with the theme, fiery. An ever-changing storm of yellows and oranges and reds. With a very imperious chirp, it opens its wings and flies straight into his chair, tucking the beak under his neck.

Once he recovers from having all of his air punched out by a bird heavier than he is, he trips straight into a bizarre in-between world where his mind has officially given up on trying to make sense of things. He sits obediently and smoothes his hands down the firebird's feathers and just. Breathes.

"I'm fine," he replies to the birds chiding croon. "Thank you. Your flames are very beautiful."

“Yes, well, humans are fragile. I was in a fight. It wasn’t a good idea.”

“See, I’d believe that, if your beak wasn’t sharp enough to cut silk. What do you need your claws for, then, o pacifist god-bird?”

“Agree to disagree. Just because I was stupid enough to get in over my head doesn’t mean—”

“Actually, I don’t know if you’re familiar with the work of Foucault—”

The Headmaster clears his throat gently and Itachi stops his rambling chat about modern French philosophy. “While I can think of few things I would enjoy more than watching such a spirited discussion, I’m afraid it’s getting quite late. Healer Febru will string me up by my ankles if I kept her patient up past their bedtime.”

Walking is—not impossible, but it is certainly going to be a trial. He stands on shaky legs and does his best impression of a bow without actually moving his head too much. “Merry part.”

“I will escort you, Mister Black,” says Professor Woodward. “Considering how events congregate around you, I do not trust you to make it to the dorms unscathed. Goodnight, Albus.”

“Good night.”

Chapter End Notes

On slang: In case it wasnt very clear: In the interest of immersion, Im going to use modern slang—or at least what passes for modern for me, having somehow become old and irrelevant. There’s no point in trying to mimic the British slang from the seventies because I won’t be able to use it correctly, or at all convincingly. So, yeah. It's not important that you know this, but since i cant imitate a native, i want to at least brag about my self-awareness

Mouth-feel because in this house, we stand for Contrapoints.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

-fall

(Tuesday, Sep 14th 1971)

The hush that falls over the student body over breakfast is—

“What did you do now,” says Timothy.

“I don’t particularly want to talk about it.” He tries to keep his tone light, but some of his internal state must leak through. Timothy’s teasing expression shifts into a tense one.

“Is it—are you okay?”

“He’s a murderer, is what he is.” Huh. Not Fawley, for once. It’s an upperclassman, a girl of, what, fourteen, fifteen?

“As I said, I do not want to talk about it.” The smile sits on his face oddly, he is aware. Too fixed, too threatening. It’s not the most diplomatic way of dealing with this, but he is conditioned to react to direct aggression in very specific ways. This is skirting close to the outside limit of his self-control.

“Oh my god, Siri—”

“Sure, let’s comfort the murderer, like that’s—”

“Come off it, Lang, the kid is eleven—”

Well. He drags his eyes over the dishes on offer today. The elves went all out. There are two, four, six, seven types of fish, sitting on tiny beds of steamed rice, several servings of fruit, and even a bowl of melon.

The day he allows jumped-up bratlings to bully him away from sashimi is the day his blood is gathering dust on the floor. He ignores the arguments that bloom ever louder and sits down at his spot. The only thing that would make this better is if he had chopsticks. Alas.

“Students.” The Headmaster doesn’t need to raise his voice to be heard. He stands up, and the invisible swell of magic pulses, once, twice, three times. “What happened to late Orion Black was a magical accident. Nothing more. It is beyond foolish to blame this death on his eleven-year-old son. I cannot force you to not be foolish, but I can insist that you keep your ignorance to yourselves. Do not force my hand.”

“Detention, Lang, until Yule,” says Professor Woodward. “I will not have you shame our House with bigotry.”

Itachi keeps his head down, eats his food and ignores the world.

The first attack comes pretty soon. Well, he says attack. It’s a prank curse, harmless and humiliating. He’s tired, but he’s not dead. Thirty centimetres to the right, ten to the left, spin a little on your heel and voila. If he tries—which he does, since he is who he is—he can make it pretty, even. It’s just about the only thing that can make his badgers smile, so he spins and twirls with all the flourish he can wring out of his body.

Hufflepuff House is still uncertain about how to deal with him. So far most are content with side glances and whispered comments. They are, in Itachi’s opinion, more frightened than angry. Whatever the Prophet wrote must have been lurid, if it had provoked fear this genuine.

His badgers, however, Andrew, Noah and Timothy, don't falter for so much as a moment. They bracket him in the corridors as best they can, and keep their chins up.

The first class of the day is Herbology, Hufflepuff paired with Ravenclaw. The eagles are less reserved than the badgers are; they don't even pretend they wouldn't enjoy watching his live dissection. History of Magic is next—this time with the Slytherins. He's not naive enough to think Slytherins won't ever pose a threat to him, but for now, he's safer among the snakes than among his own housemates. While his wretched villainy left him in hot water with the rest of the school, he has only grown more popular with the snakes. They all look at him with respect liberally tinged with fear, and stay well away.

The third class is Charms. Charms with the Gryffindors. Sage help him.

James skips over to Itachi's customary seat next to Andrew, in the furthest seat in the back of the middle row. "Darling. You don't owl, you don't floo. How am I supposed to explain to Aunt 'Rea that I've failed to woo her favourite nephew?"

"Merry meet, James," he says, propping his head up with one hand. "Lady Potter will forgive you, I'm sure. Now, Aunt Cassie on the other hand—"

"Don't talk to me about your Aunt Cassie—" He trails off, sighing. "She came to the Ministry today to express her thoughts about the drama, dressed in a dress made out of blood. Uncle sent me photos. She wore an animated layer of blood, Siri. I will never be able to top that."

"Nobody can match Aunt Cassie," Itachi says "Although a blood-dress is a little on the nose."

"It was *magnificent*. But enough about that. How's your day going? Murder any schoolchildren in cruel and unusual ways?"

Itachi's mood lifts with each word out of baby-Potter's mouth. "Not yet. The day, as they say, is still young."

“Merlin, why does my cousin talk like an old man? Speaking of, I wasn’t going to say anything, but I’m afraid my heart can’t bear this any longer. Here you are, sitting with your friends, and you don’t think to introduce me.” He leans forward, tilting his head just-so, hazel eyes widening. “Are you ashamed of me, Sirius? Is that what this is?”

Entirely against his will, a little smile sneaks onto his face. My, even Kisame wasn’t this bold. Even Shisui. “Who could ever be ashamed of you,” he says, letting some of the fondness lift up his voice.

James blinks a little, and the playful, sly expression slips into something a little vulnerable. What is this? “You make a good point. I have been rude.” He stands up and nods his head a little. “James, meet my companions, Andrew Clarke, Noah Young and Timothy Warnock. Fellow badgers, meet James Potter, my cousin, Heir to Noble House Potter.”

The three badgers who have been listening to their exchange with more interest than was warranted, nod, too shocked to say anything.

“Charmed,” says James. Beams, really. “It is not every day you see such genuine loyalty, even among badgers. Sirius has been lucky.”

“I am.” Hums Itachi, a bit amused at the three answering blushes.

“Now, before I leave you, one quick question. Siri, darling, apple of my eye, keeper of my heart, do you happen to know the Words of House Potter?”

“I do indeed,” he says, touched. Even for James, this is a lot. “*Habemus custodimus*.”

“*What we have, we keep*.” James eyes the subtly and not-so-subtly eavesdropping children. “Food for thought. See you at dinner, cousin-mine. I will be eager to hear about how your day has gone.”

What a vicious little monster. Who'd have guessed he shares no blood with the Blacks? "Merry part."

James saunters off to the seat he shares with a lion. Not Lupin, sadly, but another mousy little boy. Then it's time for class; more precisely, time to ignore pitying looks sent by Professor Flitwick and keep his fangs tucked behind his lips. He is but a humble schoolchild.

Lunch, today, happens in the kitchens. He's gotten enough jinxes sent at him today to know that his badgers' one advantage is that nobody has thought to aim at them. They are very public in their support, after all. This level of public stigma—most of it from Ravenclaws, but with a fair few Gryffindors thrown in—is harder on them than it is on Itachi.

Timothy is, unsurprisingly, handling it best. It is unclear how, exactly, his parents managed to raise a wholly self-possessed child, but it's a recipe Itachi *has* to learn. Noah is next. His redheaded friend is, well, shy at the best of times. He hates conflict but doesn't fear it, as far as Itachi could tell. No, the problem child in this case is Andrew. Andrew whose spine grows more and more straight, until he looks brittle enough to shatter into stardust.

The food is—okay. With how strange this day has been, he doesn't have the energy to hype himself up for the meal. He eats what's put in front of him, and lets his badgers decompress in their own time.

Timothy is the first one to break the silence. "I—I can't believe this." He sounds dazed, and all sorts of betrayed. "You—you're a *kid*. They're blaming *you* for—You're eleven—And it's a clear-cut case of self-defence—"

"I'm also a Black," he says, keeping his voice light. "Dark, evil, all that good stuff. Don't worry about me."

"It's not, though," says Noah. "Right? This is what your meeting was about yesterday. They knew this would happen, and they're worried about it."

Well, now. “Do you want to know? Stop and think, if you would. You’re also eleven. You deserve peace. It’s not too late to look after yourselves. I would swear an oath that I do not mind.”

“Oh shut up,” says Andrew. “We’re Hufflepuffs. Loyalty and all that. Answer the question.”

“I had to try. I don’t like seeing you mixed up in my drama, and this will get worse before it gets better.”

“Seems to me the entire Wizarding world is mixed up with your drama, Siri,” says Timothy, not unkindly. “So—is Noah right? Are the adults worried?”

Well, that’s a complicated question. Many adults are worried about Itachi, for many different reasons. “He’s not wrong. My father did die, and the Aurors failed to keep that information from the Prophet, and now—well. There might be a security team in Hogwarts to make sure everyone’s safe.”

“But why?” The sound is punched out of Timothy. “This is *crazy*! You are aware, right? This is sick. If you told me you had to eat your father’s still-warm body to survive, I’d give you a hug and tell you that you did nothing wrong.”

“It’s the magic,” says Andrew, audibly unhappy to play devil’s advocate. “Allegedly Sirius took away his father’s magic and left him to wither away in agony. I doubt that’s true, but that’s the fear. To remove magic from someone is—yeah. That’s why.”

“*He tortured him*.” Timothy’s voice rises into a shrill. “We all see it. We see how you’re still in pain Siri. And, fine, in the beginning, I told myself—he’s rich, powerful and unconcerned. Leave it alone. But now—This is nuts. It’s terrible. There are *laws*—”

Itachi tilts his head a little. Timothy is getting uncharacteristically riled up. “Let’s not lose perspective. I am still all those things—rich, powerful, unconcerned. The trial was always going to be messy. This is just—bad press.”

“I hate it,” says Timothy, looking about as miserable as Itachi has ever seen him. “I hate that you are so calm about it. I hate that you have to listen to people telling you how you should not have defended yourself. I hate that it’s legal to use the worst day of your life to sell papers.”

Itachi pauses for a long moment, confused and battling his own inklings of rage. No, come on now, you know nothing good can happen if you lose it. You’re way too insane for that. “Hey, so,” he says, dragging each word out, not sure if this is a good idea. “I have a proposal. Please, feel free to ignore it, but you three are under a lot of pressure. I’ve put you in situations you have no framework for. Do you think you would want to—talk to someone about it? A professional, like am doing?”

“You want us to go to therapy,” says Timothy, equal parts surprised and considering. “That’s —huh. I’m already in therapy, of course, but that’s back in London—”

“You’re in therapy,” asks Noah, alarmed.

Timothy blinks, head tilting slightly. “You’re not? You find out you’re practically a different species and that you will outlive everyone you know and love by like, a hundred years, and your parents don’t think you need some help with that?”

While his three badgers sit in semi-embarrassed shock, Itachi feels like he’s having an epiphany. “That explains so much,” he says. “That’s why you’re so calm and wise and thoughtful all the time.”

Timothy sends him an alarmed look, hands flying up in a defensive gesture. The blush that lights up his cheeks is scarlet and sort of patchy. “Okay, first of all, I am not. Shut up. Second of all, therapy is a sensible, normal thing. My sister started going to when she started puberty and hasn’t stopped since.”

“So would you go,” Itachi asks before Andrew or Noah can burst out with the objections he can see forming behind their eyes. “I have a special arrangement with my Mind-healer, but you hardly need such extensive security measures.”

“Even your therapist would sell you out, wonderful,” mutters Timothy. “Never mind. My parents are in charge of all that stuff, but yeah, I would love to talk to someone. My therapist in London only talked to me about like, othering and learning how to accept living in a new place. He never thought to prepare me for, I don’t know, hostile media and lethal amounts of fame.”

Izanami wept, this child. This child is unreal.

“What about you guys,” Timothy continues. The glint of determination in his eyes is quickly hidden, but not quickly enough that Itachi hasn’t spotted it. He relaxes, busying himself with food, temporarily filtering out their voices. Even if the other two don’t think they need it, Timothy will wear them down.

“To change the topic drastically, do you wanna talk about your cousin James,” says Timothy, once the savoury part of the meal is through, and they’re down to desserts. “And how he’s the most intense kid in school. Including you, which, y’know.”

“He was making a point,” says Andrew. “And he made it well. About as subtle as a punch to the face, though.”

A small, sincere smile creeps up on Itachi’s face and some of the tension in his back releases. “James is not what you would call subtle, no. It’s one of his most appealing traits.”

Noah ducks his head, hair falling into a heavy, red curtain. “I think it’s cool of him. And brave. To stand up and tell everybody off like that.”

“He is a Gryffindor,” says Timothy. “The Gryffindor. Scary, too. I wouldn’t want to cross him.”

Itachi looks at him for a long moment. “He’s scary. You’re friends with me, but James ‘look at my pretty face, can you say no to this pretty face’ Potter is scary.”

Timothy grins, pearly whites flashing, curls bouncing a little. “You’re not scary at all, actually. You’re a grumpy old man who wants us kids to get off his lawn. Potter, in contrast, threatened half of our year convincingly enough that I don’t doubt he will follow through.”

“Your idioms are ridiculous. That’s number one. James doesn’t bluff. That’s number two. Side note: if you must remember only one of those two things, remember the second one. James is Aunt Dorea’s Heir. She’d have trained him out of making empty threats a long time ago.”

“Okay then, I will,” says Timothy, a grin spreading on his face. “Speaking of, you never mentioned Potter is your cousin. That’s low, Siri.”

Itachi’s smile turns a little wistful. He would have gladly claimed James. “We don’t share blood. My Great-Aunt is married to his Great-Uncle.” To simplify the matter, and avoid the less pleasant parts. “He claimed me on a whim.”

“Good on him. I’m glad you have someone like that in your family.” His grin slips, eyes widening. “Not that you already don’t. Please ignore me, I don’t know what I’m saying.”

Itachi huffs a little, resisting the urge to ruffle the boy’s curls. “Don’t hurt yourself, I know what you mean.” He’s way off, for once. Other than the glaring exception, the one redeeming quality the Blacks tend to share is loyalty to the family. That stunt that James pulled? That’s all Aunt Dorea. “I’ll bring my little brother when we get together over the holidays.” Here’s hoping that he’s not lying. “He’s the sweetest, kindest little boy you’ve ever seen.”

“I keep imagining a smaller you, and tripping up ‘cause he can’t possibly be shorter.” James has distracted them from the overall misery of their—Itachi’s—situation.

“Hey,” he says, with mock offence. “That’s low. Also, Blacks are tall, as a rule. I’m defective.”

“Bite your tongue,” snaps Andrew, tone forceful enough to make Itachi blink. “You are no such thing.”

Noah cringes into himself, and Timothy looks as confused as Itachi.

“Umm. I think he was joking, ‘Drew,” Timothy says, before sliding his eyes to Itachi. “You were joking, right?”

Not even a little. “Yes. Yes, I was.”

“God save me. Okay, let’s just, let’s just not, okay? Let’s just talk about—music. Or something.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

A/N -- Edit for style and structure. Content is the same

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Wednesday, Sep 15th 1971)

It's a good thing that his expectations were already low for this week, this month and his life, in general. He takes what solace he can from breakfast, halfway in a meditative state. Blowing up on an unsuspecting child would hardly help matters, no matter how annoying they are. So he keeps his head down and mouth shut, letting his badgers' soft conversation wash over him. His determination to be quiet, unobtrusive and, generally, a model child is interrupted by the post.

Itachi knows all the birds his family uses. Grandfather's Icarius, Aunt Cassie's Cepheus, Aunt Dorea's Autolycus, and he's friendly with most of them. This stunning beauty is not among them. She's much too polite, for one, as she swoops down, delivering her letter to a space between the cups perfectly. Typically, Itachi has to snap his mail from the air.

The seal on the letter is telling, but not as telling as the distinctive flavour of magic on it. Lord Riddle sent him a letter. Alright. Panic about this later. For now, focus on the most pressing issue.

"Look at you," he coos at the giant, fluffy owl. It has piercing, yellow eyes and two very ear-like tufts, golden-brown plumage that matches its golden beak and claws. Its wingspan has to be two meters easy. So far, so good—about what he would expect from Lord Riddle's owl. The sweet disposition is where things are turning cuckoo. She only needs a hint of an invitation to plop in his lap, cooing at him in a deep, soft voice he could fall asleep to. His heart is overflowing and *then* Fawkes flames over. Hecate help him.

“How,” says Timothy. “How are you doing this? Why do you have two giant birds cuddling with you so early in the morning, and why is one of them the Headmaster’s familiar?”

“This sweet Lady flew here to give me her person’s letter,” he explains with a sliver of his mind not occupied by gushing. “Fawkes is a gentlephoenix who stopped by to extend his greetings.” What an unexpected treat. “Will you wait until read it and scribble a response, beautiful,” he asks the owl who chirps at him, golden beak glinting in the sun. “Excellent, thank you. Fawkes, I have the book I had mentioned when we last spoke. Let me finish this, and I’ll get it?”

Little Black,

I do not know whether to congratulate you on your infamy or laugh at you for the rest of time. The rumour mill has been agog about your dubious accomplishments.

The event we discussed should be postponed until spring. Moreover, while I am not in the business of friendly advice, my goals benefit from your continued existence. I would strongly suggest you lay low for a few months. Several people have tried to secure my help in acquiring and transporting you to any number of countries around the world. Make of that what you will.

Your sorting amuses me greatly.

Tom Marvolo Riddle

Lord Riddle,

Thank you for your letter. I already upped my security, but I will make sure to include some emergency portkeys, just in case.

The golden owl is a magnificent beauty, and I am humbled that she agreed to meet me. Since she is waiting for the reply, I must be quick in my response. I can send you a list of dates when the event could take place—constrained, obviously, by Hogwarts deadlines. If you have a more concrete date in mind, please share it. I'm sure we can come to an agreement.

All the best

Sirius Black

"Who was that," Timothy asks once the owl has flown away. Unfortunately, this means Itachi is immediately hit with sixteen different types of anxiety.

"Remember how I told you the Wizarding world can be dangerous?"

Timothy eyes him, a little taken aback by the serious tone. "Yeah?"

"Men like the one that sent me this letter are a big part of what makes it dangerous. It is my fervent desire that neither of you three ever find yourselves breathing the same air as him."

"Hold on, why is he writing to you? Is he, like, blackmailing you? Should we tell someone?"

Still disturbed by the thought of Lord Riddle and Timothy inhabiting the same plane of existence, he can't soften his expression much. "He is not blackmailing me. If anything, he is being generous. He has picked up on some concerning rumours and warned me to lay low."

Timothy doesn't sag, but it's a close thing. "That is—decent of him, I suppose?"

"It is. I will make sure to bribe him appropriately, to reinforce this state of affairs. It's a very straightforward relationship. Once more: forget the letter, the bird, and this entire conversation. It's by far the safest option for everyone."

"I swear, being your friend is like being a side character in a gangster movie. None of this is normal, you know? I want you to know, this is not how life works."

He smiles at the boy. "My life is very melodramatic, yes. I know. That's a common trait among Dark Purebloods, I'm afraid, although the Light are hardly without their own pageantry. The undeservedly wealthy have to amuse themselves somehow."

Timothy's lips press together into an unhappy line. "I'm sure. I'll have more sympathy for the proletariat once they stop accusing eleven-year-olds of murder, thanks."

"Ooh—I know that one. That was the German, no? Timothy—no, Timothy this is serious, you cannot start a conversation about equalising the social order and then walk away—"

Dinner is a strange affair.

Hufflepuffs have for the most part decided to block out Itachi's existence as a whole. No hassle, no acknowledgement—a solid go at collective shunning. It's a brutal strategy. Not for *Itachi*, of course, but his three kids take this kind of thing more to heart. With Slytherin sitting this one out, Ravenclaws ready to tear him to pieces in the name of curiosity, Gryffindors are the bewildering exception. As a whole, they make their stance clear—evil murderous children who wield Dark magic aren't welcome. And then there are the rebels. Frank Longbottom for one, is uncommonly serious. Frank and, of course—

"Cousin!"

“James.” He arranges his face into a smile that hurts his face. Tough. James doesn’t need his churlishness. “Merry meet, cousin.”

“Don’t do that to your precious face,” James coos. “It’s disturbing and unnecessary. Leave it to your favourite cousin to cheer you up, hm? Oh, do excuse me, where are my manners? Anthony, Noah, Timothy, it has been an age. I trust you’re all taking care of yourselves?”

It’s been less than three hours, you giant pillock, Itachi thinks fondly and sits back to enjoy the flustered mess that his friends become in the face of James Potter’s wildfire charm.

“Ah—yes, Potter,” says Timothy, grinning through his blush. “It has been something. Don’t worry, we’ve kept your precious cousin safe.”

“Very true, very true. Stellar work.” James hums, rocking back and forth on his heels, smile as wide as it can go. “Please, do call me James. I’m nowhere near as uptight as our little Siri.”

Itachi huffs a small laugh, less forced than he feared. “Believe him at your peril.”

“Anywho,” James continues. “I have a tragically full schedule tonight, so I thought I would stop by now to, y’know, see some faces, take a look around the house of the loyal. Oh—before I forget. My Aunt and Uncle send their love.”

The basket that James gives him is a stunning piece of magic, a piece of art in itself, carved in a style he can’t place from either life.

“Sunberries,” James says, voice firmly in the playful, unconcerned cadence.

What? Itachi’s fingers claw around the woven handle. The whispers start rippling outwards, with the two of them at the epicentre, until the entire goddamn Hall is staring at them.

“James,” he says, without a clear idea where to go from here, “I—”

“I thought that would cheer you up! Didn’t I say—leave it to your favourite cousin? Now! I have to leave, there are detentions ahead, and not a lot of time to do them. Toodles!”

The whirlwind of charisma tinged with malice storms off, leaving Itachi with a, well, priceless bounty.

“Wow,” says Anthony, eyes cloudy. “Your cousin is—a lot.”

He nods, focus hopelessly drawn by the basket in his lap.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and say this whole thing is the superlative of an over-the-top gesture?”

Well. “You have no idea.” He unhooks the silver latch, and pries open the lid. The smell of sunshine and euphoria washes over them, subtle but overwhelming at the same time.

“Woah.” His badgers huddle closer—along with a good chunk of older Hufflepuffs whose curiosity overpowered their ethical concerns. “That’s fantastic, Siri. What did you say those were?”

“Sunberries.” The important thing now is not to dive mouth-first into the basket. “They’re—well. If you live in Europe and your name is not Potter, they’re not only expensive, but next to impossible to source. If your name is Potter, then it’s a matter of picking them.”

“Expensive for you, or expensive for me,” says Noah.

Uh-oh. “Let’s not talk about money,” he hedges as best he can. “It’s vulgar, isn’t it?”

“Oh come off it you walnut,” says Timothy, mouth twitching in barely suppressed humour. “I promise we won’t hold your wealth against you. Plus, y’know, it’s just berries. The fact they’re rare is the only thing that makes them valuable.”

“Don’t talk about commodity fetishism to me, Timothy Warnock,” he snaps, mouth moving on its own. “And no, in this case, they are priceless. They are more than just a luxury good.” A whole lot of magical creatures would do a lot for a sunberry, Light and Dark alike.

“Don’t duck the question, then.”

“Oh, alright.” He estimates the amount of berries—a good pound and a half. “This could get you—an apartment. A decent apartment, in a nice neighbourhood.”

The badgers gape at him, not having expected more than a thousand galleons or so, which okay, would have been plenty outrageous.

“What the hell, Siri,” says Timothy, wide-eyed.

Fair enough. “You promised not to judge me. It’s not like James bought me an apartment. He had access to a very valuable resource, which let him make an over-the-top gesture by picking some fruit. He didn’t give me the gold equivalent.” Liar, liar. A statement like this is significant. It can be understood as a courting gift. It likely will be understood as a courting gift. What are the Potters doing?

“You could sell it, though,” says Noah.

Itachi’s hands curl around the basket. “Don’t listen to the crazy child,” he whispers to his bounty. “I would never sell you. He’s just silly.”

“Don’t baby your food, Siri,” says Anthony, amusement overtaking the shock. “It’s weird. You don’t coo at something you will eat.”

“Fair. Now. Preservation charms don’t work on something as magical as sunberries. We best finish them today, while they’re fresh. Maybe leave a couple to bribe my allies with.”

“They’re not allies, they’re friends,” says Noah, not for the first time.

“They are absolutely my allies. Dig in, children. Time is a’wasting.”

They tear through the basket with the thrill of children knowing they should be doing something wiser than this. Still, the school watches as a hundred thousand Gallons get eaten by four first-years. The taste is, predictably, heavenly, and Itachi can feel his magic thrum in delight, his aches and pains vanishing like so much smoke. His badgers don’t accept more than a handful between the three, so he eats and eats, until he feels like he’s just a giant cloud of magic and vitality.

“Shall we, then.” His s’s and r’s slide and trip, accent slipping in and out of the deeper Chikyūgo-drawl. “There are children to bribe.”

The round they make around the tables is hilarious. The heavy cloud of resentment and disgust isn’t much changed, but Itachi is high as a kite. His badgers are somewhat less buzzed but still glow with magic and euphoria.

Frank is first, who accepts his berry with a resigned but awed air. Heir Morgan after him, then Snape and Heiress Shafiq. The snakes do a very good production of a flock of birds terrified into stillness. They watch breathlessly as an Ancient and Noble Heiress gets a berry after Snape, and all but spontaneously combust.

Never mind that. He’s got one last person to bribe.

“Wait here, would you?”

He walks as straight as he can towards the Professors' table. This goal is hampered by his magic unfurling around him, lazy and sated, bobbing around him like a jellyfish.

"Merry meet, Professor," he says, aiming his bow towards the blurry figure of the Headmaster. Thank Amaterasu for his garish robes. "I hate to interrupt your dinner, but would you be so kind as to extend an invitation to Fawkes?"

"Not at all, my boy." There is a solid laugh in the Headmaster's voice, and Itachi fights the urge to fall on his ass and stare at the pretty magic. Usually, the brightness is, yes, beautiful but also sharp and painful. Now, he can't quite recall what pain is.

The matter settles itself decisively when Fawkes flames into his lap and knocks him to the ground. "Fawkes!" He nuzzles into the feathers, inhaling the fresh scent of ozone and bergamot. "I have a gift. An offering, if you will."

He fishes out a handful of berries and doesn't flinch when the golden beak snaps them from his hand, tickling his palm.

"Did you enjoy the book?"

"Oh tosh, don't start. Come to think of it, she wrote fantastic letters, too—"

He manages to stagger to his feet, arms full of firebird that started to preen his hair with his beak.

"Did you hear—Timothy's father is also a philosopher, and he will get me some of his texts. Isn't that just—"

With halting steps, he manages to carry himself and his—friend? Godly patron? Benevolent overlord? *Fawkes* to his friends and out of the room.

“I was hoping to catch some Kreacher-time, actually. Do you want to tag along?”

Fawkes trills, starting from a mid-point alto to a blood-pumping soprano, a whirlwind of a sound spiralling into the heavens.

“Smashing—”

Chapter End Notes

Owls:

Arcturus: Icarius, spotted owl
Icarius and Maera: One of the prominent myths associated with Boötes involves a man named Icarius, who lived in the region of Attica in ancient Greece. Icarius was a mortal who received the gift of winemaking from the god Dionysus, the god of wine and revelry. Dionysus taught Icarius the art of winemaking and entrusted him with a skin of wine. Icarius was known for his hospitality and shared the wine he had made with some shepherds. However, when the shepherds drank the wine, they became intoxicated and believed that Icarius had poisoned them. In their drunken confusion, they killed Icarius. After discovering the fate of Icarius, his faithful dog Maera tried to protect and mourn for him. In honor of Icarius and Maera's loyalty, both were placed in the heavens as constellations. Icarius became Boötes, the herdsman or plowman, and Maera became Canis Major, one of the hunting dogs. The brightest star in the Boötes constellation, Arcturus, is often associated with the head of Icarius in some depictions.

Cassie: Cepheus: eagle owl
Cepheus is a constellation representing a king from Greek mythology. According to the myth, Cepheus was the husband of Queen Cassiopeia and the father of Princess Andromeda.

Dorea: Autolycus: Long-eared Owl
In Greek mythology, Autolycus was a figure known for his cunning and thieving skills. He was the son of the god Hermes, who was the messenger of the gods and the god of commerce, and Chione, a mortal woman. Autolycus inherited some of his father's cleverness and became renowned as a master thief and trickster.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Stitching together two parts of one's world.

(Wednesday, Sep 15th 1971)

Kreacher brings Regulus. Itachi's heart stops, starts, and stops again. Regulus—here—Hogwarts—

"Reg—"

"Tachi—"

They collide, in a sense. Regulus launches himself at him, and Itachi drops the phoenix, the basket, drops *every single fucking thing* to catch him.

Regulus is weeping silently. If not for the growing dark patch spreading over the high neck of his robes, and the subtle tremble in his shoulders, Itachi might not have spotted it.

He inhales a halting breath, caught between panic and fanatical, hysterical love. His brother is crying—bad, terrible, the worst. His brother is *here*—beautiful, amazing, exhaling. The sunberry-induced haze clears a little, but only so enough to nudge him away from near-indiscriminate destruction.

"I've missed you," he whispers into the curls. "I've missed you like a lost limb, little brother. I am barely functional without you there to keep me out of trouble."

Regulus continues crying silently, and Itachi settles in for a wait—

Somebody approaches and Itachi's head snaps up, eyes zeroing in on the potential threat. Who dares to come near his brother when he's so vulnerable—

Timothy jerks back, both hands in the air. "Siri, do you want to take this to our room?"

They're in the Common room? How did—Never mind. It's empty for now, but not for long. Why did he call Kreacher here?

"The boy-child is right, starshine," says Kreacher. "Kreacher managed to bring an extra, but it was noted. How long we stay depends on the goodwill of the Headmaster. Lord Black expects us back soon."

Itachi's mind stutters, stumbles. Too many things are happening—Regulus—Fawkes—Kreacher—Arcturus—

Fawkes croons, the sound diving deep instead of soaring high. The timbre of it rattles, spreading like lightning from the top of his head into the floor, using his body as a conduit. The potent magical command to calm down helps sober him up a little more.

"To the room, then." Great, good idea. How? At nine, Reg is Itachi's height, and significantly heavier. He could only carry him with magic, which is a terrible idea. "Reggie, we need to move. Please, dearest—"

Kreacher snaps his fingers, and suddenly his brother is weightless, suspended in the air like a balloon.

He turns to his three badgers, wild-eyed and manic. The three boys look back. He can't quite judge their expressions, but they don't look aggressive. It will do, for now. He will grovel later. "You go first?" He manages to tone down his aggression enough that it comes out as a question. Good enough. He sounds lost and plaintive. Tough. A little dignity is a small price

to pay to get out of this without hurting anyone. He hasn't spoken to Regulus in weeks, hasn't seen or heard from him at all and suddenly he appears, crying and devastated, on the day their father died. It's a lot.

"Of course," says Timothy, subdued. Even his curls seem to droop. "C'mon guys."

"No, what, wait—" says Andrew, urgency deepening his soprano. "You—We should let you two—catch up. Talk."

Itachi takes in a sharp breath, stringing together a small thread of patience. Be nice to your kids. They're good kids. "Do whatever you want, but do it now. I am not wasting a single second with my brother." Perfect.

"Okay." Timothy's is off. Scared a little. Sad. "Okay. Okay. You go ahead to the room and me and the boys will just—Stay here, then? Come get us if you want us."

Itachi grimaces, trying at a wordless apology. Whatever appears on his face only makes his badgers flinch. "Sorry—I'm sorry. I'm alright. I just need a moment with my brother."

"Take all the time you need," says Noah, crushing his fingers together.

Itachi nods, satisfied enough. "Alright, bright star," he says under his breath. "We're safe. Let's go."

The brief pause has done nothing to calm Regulus. He's still tucked into Itachi as far as he could go, body curled and trembling. That he is silent makes it so much worse.

"This is our room and this—" he kicks the door open as best he can. "Is my space."

The bed is large enough—much too large for a kid as shrimpy as Itachi—to fit all three of them comfortably. He sits them down, back at the headboard and tries to take stock of the

situation.

Regulus is still crying, lost in grief. Alright, *think*. What would Mikoto do? He blanches. What a dull thought. Mikoto? Mikoto would put knives in their hands and set them loose to murder their feelings away. What would Timothy do?

Open communication. Timothy talks everything out, pokes and needles and prods until he is sure no misunderstandings will trip them up. Itachi might not have his unflappable common sense, but he can listen.

“What has you so upset little brother,” he says softly. “Is it—is it the death?” Amaterasu, but he hopes not. He’s already on thin ice with Regulus; he doesn’t know how he would bear an increase in tensions.

“What—of course not.” It’s hard to make out the words underneath the hiccups, but Itachi does his best. “What they’re saying about you. Grandfather said—The Aurors—‘Tachi, I’m so sorry!”

“You have nothing to apologise for.” Words flow out of him without any conscious control, as relief clears out some of the anxiety. “I am perfectly fine. Gossip is meaningless.”

“I do—I am so sorry—I acted so—”

He smooths his hand down Regulus’ back, trying for comfort. “Stuff and nonsense. You were scared, Reg. You were scared for good reason. I am sorry you had to find me in such a state. If it were you in my place—”

He shudders, mind growing mercifully blank. “I can’t tell you what I would have done, but I assure you it would be much worse. There’s nothing to forgive. You are my entire world, dearest. I couldn’t be angry with you even if I tried.”

“We do not have much time,” says Kreacher. There is so much emotion in his voice, such a complex interplay of pride and sadness and pain, that breath is punched out of Itachi all over again. He raises a hand not stroking Regulus’ back in invitation, and sighs in contentment when Kreacher joins the cuddle.

“Thank you for coming. You made me so happy.”

“Lord Black was against it, but Regulus was persuasive,” says Kreacher. “I think it was the magical oath to set fire to the Castle if he doesn’t get his way that tipped the scales.”

“Well done, little brother. Fire is always the solution.” He pauses for a second, rewinding a couple of minutes. “Fire and honest, straightforward communication,” he amends. “Which is precisely what you did, because you’re the best of us.”

Regulus makes a miserable, wet sound vaguely shaped like a laugh. “I’ve missed you, ‘Tachi. I’ve missed you so much. We’ve never been apart for more than an hour and now—”

Damn. “My books suggest this is natural and that children need to learn to be apart,” he says, grinding out each word with effort. “The literature suggests this is a good thing.”

“Nothing about this is good,” Regulus says. “What do the books say about having the person guarding you marched off to prison, while you have to stay behind, locked in a Castle.”

Itachi thinks about this for a long moment, giving the words their due attention. “The books can go die in a fire, you’re right. The Headmaster is a kind enough man. I think he won’t make a fuss about you visiting, provided we are discrete, and I’m sure Grandfather can be made to see reason. ”

“Grandfather will jump at the chance to not have me underfoot.“ He pauses, exhaling a small huff. “That’s not true. He’s doing his best, but he’s in and out of meetings. I see Grandmother more often, but she is hardly a person of authority.”

“I’ll speak to him. I’m sure he will visit me soon to discuss—the situation.”

Finally calm enough to sit in a more or less correct lotus pose, Regulus looks at him, face puffy and eyes red-rimmed. He looks adorable, croons a part of his mind. He looks terrible, growls another. “I will never get over how incompetent the DMLE is. Never. Bad press was one thing, but Grandfather is organising a thirty-man security team for you. He won’t tell me the details, but news of your supposed magic-stripping powers has spread.”

Oh, right. The letter. He should probably mention the letter.

“The Aurors are either incompetent or antagonistic,” he says. “Well, not all of them. Auror Shacklebolt is alright. More importantly, do you recall Lord Riddle?”

Regulus arches both of his brows and looks at him for half a moment. “Do I—yes, ‘Tachi, I remember your murder-friend. He’s kind of hard to forget, what with being blessed with a face that communicates how much he yearns to paint with one’s arterial spray.”

“Cute.” There are no secrets between them. He can’t do much for the boy, but he can damn well make sure he can make informed choices. “He sent me a letter. Warning us—me. Apparently, people have been trying to, ah. Bribe him to kidnap me and ship me to wherever.”

Regulus takes in a deep breath. “Yes, Grandfather was worried about things like that. There was a price on your head even before, because of the Patronus. Now, it’s getting frenzied. Grandfather hired a team to sort through the mail and pick out credible threats.”

“This world is so bizarre. Imagine sending someone a threatening letter. If ever there was a counterproductive way to go about villainy, that has to be it.”

“Yes, that is exactly the problem. That the hordes of people wanting to kill and/or enslave you are not going about it as cleverly as they should.”

“I mean.”

A short, strangled laugh bursts out of Regulus, made even funnier by the runny nose and puffy eyes. He looks like a scandalised hedgehog. “You’re such a disaster, ‘Tachi. Never mind. You should tell Grandfather about Lord Riddle. You’ve been causing such a mess, you have no idea. Your shenanigans with the Longbottom Heir and the Potter Heir, not to mention Morgan and Shafiq haven’t gone unnoticed.”

“James claimed me. Us.” He lets the fond smile creep up on his face. “He called out the entire school after the news broke. Gave us a gift, too. Grandfather might not appreciate it but Aunt Cassie will.”

“Merlin, Aunt Cassie.” Regulus shudders, and not only for show. “I don’t know who is scarier, her or Aunt Dorea. They’re close, you know. Best friends.”

“Well, they are sisters,” he says philosophically before something like dread creeps up on him. “They have treated you with kindness, I assume? With all the care and respect that is your due?”

“Yes, Circe, of course. They are fantastic. Terrifying but fantastic.”

“James told me about the blood-dress. He was very impressed.”

“I don’t know if I like you being so close to this James,” says Regulus, not beating around the bush. “My mind-healer says I shouldn’t be jealous, but I can’t quite follow his logic. Why wouldn’t I be jealous? You’re the best brother, and you’re mine.”

“Everyone and their cat knows I would happily dance in the ashes of the world to see you smile, Reg,” he says, fond. “I remind them from time to time, to keep things fresh. Be jealous if you want but you have little reason to be. Plus, you will like all my allies here. My three badgers, for example.”

“Ah yes, part of Grandfather’s headache. Not only did you befriend three Ancient and Noble Heirs, but also three Muggleborns and an illegitimate Prince.”

Itachi raises his eyebrows. “If they can’t spin my networking across blood lines, then our House is beyond saving. You know I don’t pay any attention to the blood-purity nonsense. Plus all the children I collected are smart, adorable and loyal. If someone has objections, they are welcome to raise them.”

Speaking of loyal and kind. “How are you, Kreacher?”

“I am well, child.”

Regulus harrumphs. “He is more than well. He’s been sitting in my lessons. His calligraphy is so far ahead of ours, we’re barely in the same category.”

Kreacher scoffs, but his ears twitch. Since the old elf is still cuddled up to his side, it’s not too awkward to lean down and nuzzle into his head. “I am so happy to hear that. You deserve the world—you’ve earned the world. It doesn’t surprise me your niche is art; I’ve always admired your discerning eye.”

“I’m trying to get him to use some of the inks and brushes you left behind, but so far it’s been fruitless.”

“I have better things to do than waste time on frivolities,” sniffs Kreacher.

“Art is not frivolous at all. Not at all, dear. If our lives weren’t what they are, I’d focus on at least one method of artistic expression for myself. Reg, of course, would excel in everything and anything he sets his mind to.”

“Did you do it—before,” asks Regulus.

“I did, actually.” He smiles at their taken-aback expression. “Not for long, but it was the highlight of my youth. Clans specialised in at least one art form, back then. We were all taught things like tea ceremonies and calligraphy, but my Clan specialised in dance.”

“How—why don’t I know this already,” asks Regulus, playing up his outrage very well. “That is important intel for me to have, ‘Tachi. Would you be interested in something similar this time around?”

He blinks, not having expected this line of thought. “Tentatively yes? When it becomes relevant? We have a swathe of pressing concerns.”

“Sure, sure,” says Regulus. “Hey, Kreacher, what’s our time like?”

“A couple of minutes left, bright star. We will be pushing on the outer limit of Lord Black’s conditions.”

“Before you go—let me introduce you to three of the badgers I’ve claimed,” he says, squeezing Kreacher a little. “And keep in mind—they’re the among the five that stood by me without a moment of hesitation, at considerable cost to their social standing.”

“They’re not good enough for you,” says Regulus, adding a sniff for effect, “but nobody is. Let’s see them, then.”

Reg fixes himself up in barely a minute, with assistance from Kreacher. His eyes are still puffy, but the splotchy skin settled in its natural bone-white, because Blacks invest all their pigment in their hair.

“It’s best they come here. By now, the Common room will be full, and we don’t want any extra eyes on you, little brother.”

Andrew, Noah and Timothy sit in the Common room, very much kept apart from the dozen or so children playing at being unaffected. All three are quiet, with far too much tension in their

jaws and shoulders for eleven-year-olds. They should be worrying about assignments and puppy-crushes, not murder and mental breakdowns.

“Siri,” says Timothy, with a wooden smile. “Do you need something?”

“I wanted to show you three something,” he says, keeping his posture loose. “If you’re available?”

“Of course.”

They are all but jumping out of their skin, anxiety visible even to the most casual observer. Since their weird, weird House is ignoring them with the intensity of a thousand suns, it probably goes unnoticed.

“Thank you.” This time his smile must be less terrible because all three thaw a little, shoulders falling from around their ears.

Reg hasn’t moved from his lotus position on Itachi’s bed, and the three badgers gawk when he ushers them into his bedroom. Is there a taboo about sleeping chambers here? He hadn’t come across anything like that in his reading, but that doesn’t mean much.

“Little brother, Kreacher, these are my companions here at Hogwarts, Noah Young, Andrew Clarke and Timothy Warnock. Badgers, this is my little brother, Regulus Black, and the person who raised me, Kreacher.”

“Merry meet,” says Regulus, inclining his head, echoed by Kreacher’s barely audible rasp. It’s thrilling to introduce Kreacher like this, knowing he will be treated with the respect that is his due. His Pureblood allies would be less understanding.

“Merry meet,” says Timothy, bowing his ridiculous bow. Andrew and Noah settle for ‘Nice to meet you’, which looks more natural.

There is a beat of silence, both sides uncertain how to proceed from here, but visibly dying from curiosity. Itachi, in contrast, feels like a sleepy cat, satisfied to have all his kittens in his reach, safe and happy.

“Do you happen to recall that big batch of Muggle philosophy that we got Kreacher to haul in for us, Reg?”

(“Oh God, not again—”)

Regulus sends him a curious, slightly offended look. “Me? Do *I* recall a haul of books—Are you feeling well? Do you need—”

“Yes, yes, very amusing. There was one book there, by one Lady Warnock—”

“Yes, of course, Existentialist Ethics—Wait. No. Truly?”

Itachi nods and sends Timothy a smug look. “Yes. Timothy here is the Lady’s Heir. Not only that, his father is also a published philosopher and a lecturer at a prestigious institution of higher learning.”

Regulus turns his enormous eyes onto Timothy who visibly doesn’t know what to do with himself. Which is fair. Regulus is adorable.

“Was that necessary,” says Andrew. Everything about his three badgers screams ‘exhausted relief’ which is touching, but doesn’t make him feel any better about putting them through any of this.

“It was, yes. Not only because it will annoy the reprehensible side of my family, but because Reg has met five children in his life, and he needs an ice-breaker.” He sends Andrew a swift smile and is glad to see golden eyes settled. “I am sorry, truly. You deserve better from me.”

“Nope,” says Noah. “No. Stop it. Your father died, one way or another. The press and your brother—I wish we could help you more.”

Itachi’s smile slips into a more wistful line, but he has nothing to say. They can’t help, but he recognises they want to.

“‘Tachi—‘Tachi we must visit them—” Regulus interrupts the rather depressing internal monologue. “Your Master Warnock issued an invitation just now—We *must*—Lady Warnock is writing a follow-up—”

He joins his brother on the bed and wraps himself around his back like an octopus. “Anything, starshine. I am not sure we can manage before Yule, however, what with us stuck in this infernal Castle.”

“Yule is fine,” says Regulus, twisting so his face is buried in Itachi’s neck. ”I will visit, though, as many times as I can squeeze out of Grandfather. I approve of your companions, although I can’t believe you managed to snag Lady Warnock’s Heir. Oh, wait, let me move, ‘Tachi, I haven’t spoken to your other badgers—“

“No.” He slumps further, making his body fall straight onto Regulus. It’s hardly a lot, all things considered, but the point is made. “I haven’t seen you in weeks, little brother, and best believe I will get my share of cuddles one way or another.”

“Stop it—I have to leave in less than a minute, I don’t want to make a bad impression on your allies—”

“I’m sure they won’t mind. They’re very sensible.”

“‘Tachi, for Lady’s sake—”

“We must go, child.” It’s the first thing Kreacher said in mixed company, and his badgers almost visibly recoil, surprised by the depth and rasp of the sound. “Magic of the vow tightens around us. Best leave now before we’re forced.”

“Alright. Alright.” Reg squirms in his arms until he is as wrapped around Sirius as he is wrapped around him. “I love you,” he says, voice no less fierce for the tremble. “I will see you soon.”

With some reluctance, Itachi lets him go. “Love you both,” he says, as Regulus shuffles to Kreacher. “More than anything.”

They’re gone between one moment and the next, and any remaining energy whooshes out of Itachi with them. He slumps in his bed, digging the flat of his palms into his eyes. Alright. You’re alright. It’s just emotional whiplash, calm down.

“Holy God, Siri, that was intense,” says Timothy, somewhere between overwhelmed, concerned and relieved. “Do you need—can we help.”

Something not unlike a sob catches in his throat, and he swallows, once, twice, three times. “I am fine,” he says, well aware of how rough his voice sounds. “Seeing my brother is a privilege. I need a moment.”

“Of course. It’s getting late, too. Why don’t we all rest up, hey?”

“Ложись с богом спать; утро вечера мудренее,” he can’t help but say, probably mangling the rolling r’s . “It’s from a folk tale, never mind. Your advice is fantastic, as usual. Let me just—”

Fawkes chooses that moment to knock on his door with his beak, which should look ridiculous, but it’s almost enough to push him over the edge and straight into sobbing.

“Come in, please, you are always welcome—”

Fawkes croons at about one-fourth of the volume he’s come to expect. It’s a soft, haunting sound, filling the room with a self-aware, accepting stage of grief. He’s debating whether he can kick everybody out in time, or if he should hide under the covers when Fawkes glides into his lap. He hiccups into the soft feathers.

There is only so much you can do when an immortal fire-god comes to share your grief. He can’t hurt Fawkes, of course, but he does his best to cling gently, burrowing into his unlikely protector as best he can. There is nothing to do about this eruption of emotion but to ride it out and prevent it from fucking shit up on the way out. Noah is right, after all. One way or another, his father is dead. He won’t grieve for the individual, but he will grieve for another lost opportunity.

The badgers shuffle out of his space at some point, while Fawkes is still singing, spinning tales of grief and acceptance. Phoenixes are creatures of fire and death and life, when it comes down to it, for all that they’re symbols of Light and goodness. Fawkes doesn’t sing of forgiveness, he speaks of letting go, of sacrificing lost hopes on the altar of new beginnings. It’s not at all a gentle process, but it is a cleansing one.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Real-life clashes with Hogwarts-life, and children are being children.

(Thursday, Sep 16th 1971)

Itachi is not naive enough to expect things to settle in a day. That hardly makes the frenzied children any easier to bear. Itachi's name is on everybody's lips and lines are being drawn and re-drawn by the minute. It's a boarding school for civilian children—being mindlessly dramatic is allowed. In theory, he doesn't begrudge the children their overwrought sense of drama. In practice, however, yesterday was harrowing, today will be worse, and Itachi barely has a spoonful of composure to his name.

On most days, he can ignore the dysphoria of being an adult living as a child. On most days, he can flow into his role without much difficulty. It's hardly a demanding one. Sirius Black, the cultural figure is such an oddity, he is allowed almost any eccentricity. He doesn't talk about his upbringing, and they fill in the blanks with whatever story fits their perceptions. It's a useful system—on most days.

On days like these, it's forcing himself to ignore the yawning chasm between the problems he's facing and the banal setting he is forced into is about the most he can manage. How would this have played out if he was a child? What monster would they have raised? Take a politically powerful child and treat him like he's evil for long enough, and you can be sure you will get what you deserve.

It would be one thing if this was a political game. He might have understood if this was a smear campaign against House Black. That would, at least, have a purpose. But this—this is humans at their absolute lowest. Mindless, pointless, self-defeating destruction. Sirius Black is not a working-class Muggleborn without any political sway. Raising the future Lord Black to have revenge on his mind and evil in his soul servers nobody.

Put that aside for now. You can't do a lot about most of those things, but you can keep your responsibilities in order.

On most days, he doesn't think of the children he has claimed as his responsibility. On most days, he can make himself forget he is not one of them. Today, he wants to try—*really* try—manifesting his Sharingan, and see if his Susanõ is big enough to keep the children safe.

"Dark thoughts," says Andrew. "I don't know that I've ever seen you this grim, Siri."

Itachi meets his eyes, gaze softening by instinct. He might be a wink and a nudge away from bloodlust—he might feel like a Shinobi in hostile territory—but that doesn't mean he gets to snap at his children.

"I don't know that I will be good company today, I'm afraid," he says, with complete honesty. "Yesterday was—a lot. Seeing my brother—" Seeing Regulus only reminded him that he is in a fucking school and not where he should be—"Me and Reg are close. It's beyond difficult to be kept apart like this."

"I miss my sister too," says Andrew, a complicated little smile quirking his lips. "I'm glad I got to meet your Regulus. He looks like a special boy."

"He really does," says Timothy, with a pale shadow of his wholesome smile. The level of aggression is weighing on Timothy. Noah treats all attention like aggression, so he has learned to handle it well. This, for him, is life as normal. Andrew only grows fiercer when threatened, innate stubbornness coming to the front. Timothy is a well-adjusted, peaceful boy. He has lived a charmed life full of love and support, and while that is a big part of what makes him so precious, it also makes him easy to hurt.

Timothy could learn a lot from James, Itachi thinks. He doesn't know James that well, yet—he doesn't even know any of his kids that well, yet—but he suspects the two boys have soft spots in similar places. Aunt Dorea made sure to give James teeth and claws to guard his, however. Timothy probably never expected he would have to.

“I admit I didn’t know what to expect—” continues Timothy. “He looks so much like you, but he acts very differently. I thought you would be more similar, with how close you are.”

Itachi smiles a little, fond. It is an astute observation, for only having spent minutes in each other’s company. “We’re very different people. Regulus is everything light and kind to be found in the House Black. Kreacher and I raised him—” What are you doing, talking about these things out in the open? He breaks off, the soft smile folding behind a reserved version of an ANBU expression. “Perhaps it is best to continue this conversation in a more private setting. We seem to have caught the attention of some on-lookers.”

Whatever shines from his eyes must be more honest than usual, because the eavesdropping children shrink away, eyes dropping down instinctively. Even civilians—especially civilians—recognise a predator when it snarls in their face.

“Hey, Siri,” says Timothy, voice light and forced. “While I can’t say I’m personally all that surprised by this iteration of Heir Black, I have a feeling you kept your claws away all this time for a reason. Do you want to let all that effort go to waste because of a bad day?”

Good point, good point.

“I will talk to Madam Woodward about a Calming Draught,” he says, as evenly as he can. “I need to make an appointment with the Healer either way.” With the amount of Sunberries he ate last night, his body is chock-full of magic. One good thing to come out of this mess, perhaps?

“That might be for the best. Personally, I think this side of you is really cool but maybe not like this?” Timothy is always earnest and careful with his words, but it hits differently when Itachi is as keyed up as he is. Usually, he would melt into a puddle of adoration; now, his protective instincts play up. He is trying to unbend his violence-oriented mind enough to say something lighthearted when Grandfather’s Icarius drops a letter and flies away without pause. He plucks it from the air before it hits the cups absently.

Never mind the schoolchildren. Read your damn letter.

Dear Sirius,

I hope this letter finds you well. I imagine it will not, but a man can hope.

I will be meeting you today after lunch, in place of your second block of lectures. There are many things we need to discuss, and many people we need to discuss them with. Prepare for several exhausting hours. We will be meeting with the Head of your security team, your Head of House, representatives of our law firm and Cassie and Dorea. I had wished to spread this over several days, but needs must.

Congratulations on repairing your relationship with Regulus. I did not doubt you would. Future visits will be more complicated to arrange, because of your increased security. We will discuss it all in person.

Remind me to scold you about all the Potter drama you've brought down on our heads. Between you and Dorea's Heir, you've shaken things up. You would think two eleven-year-olds don't have much influence over the Wizengamot, and you would be wrong.

Keep yourself safe,

Your Grandfather

"Good news," drawls Andrew. Whoever taught this child to be dangerous should be commended. He's up there with James, when he wants to be, and James had Dorea Black as a primary instructor.

"Depends on your point of view, I suppose." He strangles a sigh and folds the letter into his pocket. "My Grandfather is coming to the school after lunch. You will have to find another partner for Charms."

Timothy's eyes are worried, but his tone is brittle-cheerful. "Meetings? That's cool. Very grown-up, very on-brand."

What does that even mean? Goodness, these children. It does make Itachi unclench some, which was perhaps the point. "I was going to ask if you want to have a private lunch but that will have to be postponed. I likely won't even make it to dinner, with how many people I will have to see today."

"They will remember to feed you?"

"At least one of the meetings will include a Healer. I'm sure I will be fed."

Andrew nods, not at all willing to be embarrassed about fussing. "Good. Moving on—work with me in Herbology? Tim can partner with Noah. Please?"

Itachi looks at his most temperamental little badger. It's not out of character as such—Andrew is casually possessive of all of them, Itachi most of all—but he isn't this direct about it.

There is only one answer, however. "Of course." Tomorrow, tomorrow he will prod a bit.

Andrew nods. If he were anyone else, Itachi would assume he was intimidated and was looking to Itachi for comfort. Since it's Andrew, it's likely nothing as simple as that.

"Best be off. Professor Woodward looks angry enough to spit fire, and I don't want to be on the receiving end of that," says Timothy, with the forced cheerfulness of a child nearing the end of his rope.

Ravenclaw. Somehow Itachi forgot they shared this class with Ravenclaw. Even Gryffindor would have been better. The lions, bless their little hearts, were straightforward creatures. Ravenclaws, in contrast, will jeer and prod and nudge, and Itachi's temper is not as foolproof as he'd like.

By the time they reach the Herbology classroom, Ravenclaws are already there, most of them staring at Itachi like he is presently butchering a small child. The class won't start for at least fifteen minutes and Itachi can already tell there is at least one child here stupid enough to cause real damage.

The Morgan Heir—Athelstan—draws away from his herd with firm, measured steps, meeting Itachi halfway. "Merry meet," says the boy, impressively blank for how uncomfortable he must be with being the focus of attention.

Itachi nods back, pasting a polite enough smile on his face. "Merry meet."

Morgan opens his mouth again, likely to parrot some procedural bit of polite gibberish, when he's interrupted.

"Don't speak to him Athelstan," hisses one of the Ravenclaw girl-children. Parry, he recalls. She ostensibly speaks to Morgan, but she's turned to face Itachi."You know what he is."

Itachi raises an eyebrow at the daring Muggleborn. He's not even angry; the sheer rash stupidity of this situation doesn't inspire real anger. At least she's brave about her—whatever this is.

Andrew, somewhat predictably, doesn't share his high-handed approach. He steps up next to Itachi, lips twisted in a sneer that would pass muster with Lord Riddle. Should he stop this somehow? He probably should. It would help if he didn't feel so utterly detached. Alas, Andrew will, at worst, make them cry. Itachi keeping his temper is a matter of life and death.

"Enough, Parry." Oh, interesting. He did not expect Morgan to involve himself any further. Now the question is if he will be more or less politic than Andrew would have been. "Sirius is my peer and a valued member of my circle. You are neither."

Uncertainty flashes over Parry's face, but the girl decides, like a good baby-extrovert, that offence is the best defence. "You can't mean to defend a twisted, evil boy like him? You know what he did. He's an unnatural *freak.*"

Itachi, thus far willing to stay uninvolved, physically feels the calm evaporate from his veins. His eyes fall to half-mast, and his shoulders relax into his most casual-lordling pose. "What was that, little girl," he says, meeting her eyes, letting her see how unamused he is by her poor choice of terminology.

"You heard me." The glare she sends him is not even bolstered by bravado. The girl genuinely believes that she has the upper hand, here. "I should not even have to be in the same room as you—"

Andrew interrupts whatever the suicidally brave little monologue would have been.

"If you knew the first thing about what your words mean, you bigoted little nuisance, you would be horrified by yourself." Itachi blinks. Andrew means his business. He hasn't even raised his voice. Instead, he takes a few casual steps closer, leaning bodily into Itachi. "I thought you were just a social climber," he continues, gentling his voice into a soft coo, "but you're not, are you? You're a grasper, clawing your way up from mediocrity by any means necessary. Siri could be homeless, penniless and alone, and he would be ten times anything you could ever hope to be."

Silence is heavy, with all eyes trained not on Itachi for once, but Andrew who looks as calm and friendly as if he had recited a poem.

"How dare you—" says a girl-eagle. "She wasn't even talking to you—I will tell Professor Flitwick—"

Fawley of all people steps in. "I mean, Andrew is not wrong," he says, scowling. "I hate Black, everyone knows that, and even I think she is full of it. Just last week she was sucking up to him and every other toff like there was no tomorrow. She is just a brat looking to make rich, powerful friends."

“Alright maybe we should all calm down,” says Timothy, both arms raised in the air in a gesture of surrender.

“Nobody asked you, lover-boy—” snaps someone, which finally has Itachi deciding he has had enough of this—

Morgan snaps his head up from his slouched position. “Watch your mouth, Read,” he says in an ice-still voice. “You all need to stop this foolishness. Nobody wants to start a feud in their first month at Hogwarts, but that is where this is heading.”

“Who would listen to you,” says Parry, shock having faded into anger. “You speak to your Housemates like this, after defending that sort—”

“Students. An explanation, if you please. Now.”

Professor Woodward shows not a hint of an expression, even to Itachi’s arguably professional eye.

“Well?”

“We were engaged in a riveting philosophical discussion, Professor,” Itachi says, voice dipping into an interesting cadence. It is clear to everyone—Professor Woodward more than most—that he is not only furious but willing to be mean about it. “I was interested in how one would structure a dialectic if one of the two sides was limited to arguments devoid of reason. My classmates from Ravenclaw were kind enough to indulge me. It was a very rewarding experience, all around. I learned a lot.”

“Is that so.” The Professor doesn’t take her eyes off Itachi. Unlike most of the children, she knows Itachi could cause damage if he wanted to.

“My classmates are so patiently trying to teach me lessons, Professor. I will be sure to repay any debts I have incurred.”

He meets her pursed lips by setting his jaw and tilting his head, not so much in a gesture of arrogance, but determination. He promised not to retaliate with violence, and he won’t. That’s as much as they will get from him.

“Very well. Welcome, class. I warn you now—any misbehaviour will be frowned upon. Try me at your own peril. Miss Perry, Mister Reed, you’re in front. Mister Black, Mister Clarke, you’re in back. Mister Warnock, fifteen points to Hufflepuff. In.”

Parry loses Ravenclaw sixty points over the course of the lecture, which puts her in the lead punishment-wise. Andrew loses forty, same as the Reed-boy, and Morgan and Fawley both earn twenty. Timothy earns himself another fifteen, and Itachi is left on an even zero. He’s left alone for the most part, not participating in the lesson past answering the occasional question.

“Professor, may I have a word,” he says at the end of the lesson.

The Professor raises an eyebrow at his badgers that lurk behind him, and he tries for a placating smile. “It is perhaps best they stay too. It concerns them, tangentially.”

“Very well. Your next lesson is History of Magic? I will write you a note. Well?”

“I assume you have been informed about the meetings my Lord Grandfather has scheduled in the school?”

“I am.” She doesn’t look happy about the fact. “I was of the opinion that such things should be done outside of a teaching establishment, but I was outvoted.”

Itachi purses his lips right back, just as displeased. “I share your opinion, but that is not what I wanted to discuss. The topic of this particular set of meetings is that of organising additional security for me. I understand Grandfather has hired a team of Hit-wizards.”

Woodward looks at him for a long moment. He can’t quite read her; her mannerisms are too divorced from the social convention he knows. “That, I was not made aware of. Is there a concrete reason for these new measures, other than the obvious? I take it the DMLE is involved?”

Itachi jerks his head into something deeper than a nod but more shallow than a bow. “I was told there were credible threats made to my, ah. Life and liberty, let’s say. Grandfather is concerned. As is Auror Shacklebolt. One of the meetings today is with him, as it happens.”

“I will make sure to be present at that meeting, then. Please schedule a meeting with me and the leader of your security team. Anything else?”

“Yes. Mister Clarke, Mister Warnock and Mister Young will be the most affected by this. I will be writing to their guardians, to inform them of my situation and ask if they consent their children be—ah—included in this situation. I would ask the school to do something similar. If nothing else, this will add weight to my account.”

The witch looks between Dark Pureblood Heir and three Muggleborn children and frown eases up a little. “I assure you I would have done so without your urging, but I applaud your good sense. Is there anything else you would like to bring to my attention? Anything I should prepare for?”

Well, that’s pointed.

“No, I will not bring the full weight of House Black on the heads of a headstrong eleven-year-old girl, no matter how unwise her comments might be. Now, the Reed boy—”

He thinks he sees a glint of humour in her eyes, but it’s quickly folded into stern disapproval. “I have come to hold you to a very high standard of behaviour, Mister Black. Please don’t

disappoint me by engaging in foolish comeuppance. Settle your disputes in an appropriate fashion, if you would."

Don't feed the boy to Aunt Cassie—message received. Lady but it is pleasant to spend time with adults, for once. They're so easy to get along with.

"Honestly, Professor, even if I were inclined towards massive overreactions, the parts of my House with any real operating power have better things to do than involve themselves in schoolyard arguments. I promised I wouldn't harm any of the children unduly, haven't I?"

"Excellent. Anything you three would like to add?"

Timothy steps forward without so much as a pause. "Yes, Professor. I think we should split our dorm. I understand there is little you can do about the way the students are treating Sirius, but he should have peace in his own room. Especially if he is going to have a security team. I would ask you to place the four of us in a four-bed dorm, please."

Professor Woodward is quiet for a moment, visibly mulling over this. Itachi, on the other hand, grows even more relaxed. What a clever clutch of children he's found. "An unorthodox request, but this is an unorthodox situation. I will consider it. Anything else? Alright. Here is the note for Professor Binns. Goodbye, children."

Timothy pulls them into the first available nook that is far away from the Herbology classroom to be reasonably safe from Professor Woodward's wrath. "Death threats—what the Hell, Siri—"

Noah saves him from answering. "I mean," he says, blinking owlishly at Timothy instead of Itachi for once. "He's a celebrity. Great Royal Prince Black or whatever. Celebrities get death threats all the time. It's not that weird."

Timothy inhales, eyes trained at the ceiling, exhales and starts the whole process again. Huh—a reasonably effective calming mechanism, clearly trained.

"The real question is, what changed," says Andrew, looking like he doesn't want the answer to that question. "If you get death threats all the time, why did Lord Black hire a security team now?"

Lady love them, but he can't get into this now. How would he even explain the concept of a credible threat?

The short answer it is. "I don't know," he says. "Grandfather hasn't told me, and I am not curious. I don't mind the security team, I think it's a solid idea. They will be limited, obviously, in what they can do, but I think nobody seriously expects me to be attacked here. The team will serve as a deterrent, I would think."

"God, Siri, you never catch a break, do you? First, your father attacks you, then the whole country goes mad for no reason and now—"

Itachi sighs a little, without a single clue how to respond. "At least you understand now why it's difficult for the students to get a rise out of me. My problems tended to be like this, growing up. Fawley and Perry don't stack up to the fact people want to murder me—or that I've put you three at risk and I can't figure out how to fix that."

"Seems to me a security team is a good solution for that too," says Noah, temporarily supplanting Timothy as the most even-tempered of his kids. "And, I mean, this shouldn't last too long? This is just a scandal, right? Don't those blow over pretty quick?"

The nonsense in the paper will blow over, but the bounty is going to remain. What he *should* have done was keep all the children at arm's length and speed through Hogwarts as quickly as possible. Although, that would mean Regulus would be alone in his later years—

"I'll look into additional measures," Itachi says. "It is too late now, the damage is done. I can only apologise for putting you in danger. I am truly sorry. I will do everything I can to keep you safe."

Chapter 15

(Thursday, Sep 16th 1971)

There's not much patience left in Itachi, by the time History of Magic ends and his meeting with Grandfather is next. His badgers see just how little rope he has to his name, so they do their best to keep him isolated from the rest of the children. It's wildly unfair. He's the adult here. He should not be hiding behind a wall of eleven-year-olds.

"You're early, Mister Black," says Professor McGonagall without so much as a twinge of surprise. "Your Grandfather is set to arrive in thirty minutes, and he doesn't strike me as the sort to be fashionably early."

Itachi sets about arranging his face into a neutral smile. It's a bit too slow, as evidenced by the disturbed twitch of the Professors' eyebrow. "I had hoped you'd find it in your heart to allow me the refuge, Professor. I do not have any strength left for gossiping children."

"Your Head of House had informed the faculty of your—misadventures," she says, with a proud smile of all things. "While I cannot condone anything that took place, I do congratulate you on your choice of companions."

"They are precious, precocious and all too willing to jump into fights that aren't theirs. I adore them while drowning in anxiety."

Professor McGonagall cocks her head a little, her Animagus form shining through for a moment. "I imagine they feel much the same, Mister Black. I'd go so far as to say those exact words are repeated by everyone who comes to know you even a little."

Yikes. "I'm certain I couldn't say."

"It's definitely true for at least one of my lions," she continues, entirely without mercy. "Mister Potter has gotten himself nineteen detentions and counting."

He doesn't try all that hard to stop the smirk from curling his lips. "He gave them warning, to be fair," he says. "Recited his House Words and everything. I don't know if you expect me to object, but standing up for family is part of parcel of the Black experience."

"If only the school rulebook included exceptions to overzealous second cousins," she says, dry as dust. "I do not expect you to do anything about it, as the case may be. I can't say the school expected yet another show of how far a Potter invested in a Black will go, but at least there is solid precedent."

The subtext is annoying, but Itachi is both too drained to take exception and too amused to make anything of it. They're at that age when all emotion will be thought of as 'puppy love'. As long as no public declarations or accusations are made, it's more than worth it to let it all fly over his head.

"I will talk to James about being more—politic about it all. Surely, he's made whatever statement he wanted to, by now. Anything else he hopes to accomplish will benefit from a little discretion. Don't you agree, Professor?"

"Lady love me, but I am fortunate you are not one of my lions." She shoots him a faux-disapproving look. "Wouldn't appreciate some peace and quiet as much as your poor Professors would?"

"Peace and quiet," he says, letting wistfulness tug the tone of his words upwards into a lilting cadence. "I read about it. It's a lovely concept, Professor, definitely not talked about enough."

"Ach, child, so dramatic. It's times like these that I doubt you're not Cassiopeia's get, you know?" The Professor blinks, mouth tightening. Understandable; the joke was a bit on the nose.

"Thank you," he settles on. He can't claim any real hurt, and it would be exhausting to pretend otherwise. "I greatly admire Aunt Cassie's style."

Professor McGonagall inclines her head, but she seems content to let the conversation fade into a comfortable silence. A kind, gesture, that. Any scrap of calm Itachi can wrap around himself will serve him good, going forward.

The Floo lights up precisely on time, and Lord Black steps out with long strides matching his determined expression. Aunt Dorea floos in moments after, resplendent in multi-layered robes in golds and browns. Her hair is caught in a sleek bun at her nape, and Itachi spares a moment to admire ways with which women can communicate their unwillingness to take any shit with the cut of their sleeves and the draping of their cloaks.

Aunt Cassie is next. The two sisters have to be coordinating their outfits; they *have* to be. Aunt Cassie chose to forgo the hypersexual motif for once, and went straight to dangerous. She wears a leather bodysuit that covers her from the end of her heeled boots to the top of her neck. Dragonhide, if Itachi is not very mistaken, dyed a deep burgundy. Over the bodysuit, she draped a fur cloak which, combined with dramatic makeup and wild curls, makes her look like she's just gotten back from a hunt.

An older Lady follows the two Black sisters. She's almost half their size and wears a high-necked robe in black velvet and sensible black shoes. If she's in any way intimidated by any of them, she doesn't show it.

The last arrival is a vaguely familiar man, who Itachi is pretty certain was the leader of the team that guarded him in the hospital. He's a good choice, image-wise, tall and lightly muscled, with dark chestnut-red hair falling to his jaw in subtle waves. The children will look at him and see a storybook hero, and not a hit-wizard which he likely is.

Preoccupied with admiring the eclectic group, Itachi floats through the procedural greetings with half a mind, throwing a 'merry meet' here and a bow or a nod there. After all these years, he doesn't need to pay much attention to the song and dance. The hierarchy is more or less clear, especially since Itachi is currently operating as Heir Black, not student Black.

It takes longer than it should to finally find themselves in, what Itachi can only assume once was a staff room. The possible hit-wizard sweeps the room with every sign of a professional, setting a slew of privacy charms after everyone is seated. "You're a sight for sore eyes, grandson. I admit I had not expected you to be so even-tempered about all of this."

“My brother is correct,” says Aunt Dorea. While Itachi can see her mannerisms in James, she lacks his warmth. That, there, is a woman capable of tearing him into pieces without a moment’s hesitation if it benefits her and hers. “I can’t say I’ve heard of a Heir Black as self-possessed as you are. All our contacts agree on this. Your conduct and manners are flawless, your actions are unpredictable and your connections are wide. Congratulations, nephew.”

Itachi blinks a little, taken aback at the outpouring of praise, delivered by this witch of all people. “Thank you,” he says, guarded and not hiding it all that much. “Your Heir has been a great source of comfort. I can tell you that my allies are more frightened of him than me.”

“That can be counted among your victories,” says Aunt Cassie. The interesting thing about the Black sisters, other than the obvious, is that, between the two, Cassie is the softer one. On the flip side, she is also hungrier and eager for scandal and movement. In many ways, Aunt Cassie is the real danger to tradition. Stagnation is death, in her eyes. “It’s a rare skill, to hide your fangs in plain sight. I do not know who taught you, because it wasn’t Walburga Black.”

Is this—a pep talk? Are the adults here to keep his spirits up?

“Thank you,” he says, with a questioning lilt in his voice. “I am honoured.” The sentiment ‘*if we could move on to business*’ very much hangs in the air.

Grandfather smirks. “Practical as always. Very well. The first and most important topic to discuss is how to tackle the death threats.” Not the funeral of your son? “You mentioned that Riddle wrote to you?”

Back on firmer ground, Itachi nods. “He mentioned that he was contacted about, ah, acquiring me. I was also warned to lay low. The Prophet stirred up interest on an international scale.”

“The Prophet didn’t do anything your Patronus didn’t start, child,” says Aunt Dorea with an amused little smile. “You can only be unique in so many ways before people decide to be proactive about getting your blood into their bloodlines.”

Itachi matches her, smile for smile. What a strange thing to say to an eleven-year-old. “Good thing I’ve made myself valuable to important people, then.”

“Very good,” says Aunt Dorea, very much like placing a stamp of approval on a mission statement.

“If Riddle was contacted, so were others,” says Aunt Cassie, not as sanguine about it as her sister is. Interesting. “Others who need gold more than they need political allies. You are in real danger, child. It is not wise to be flippant about it.”

Bless. “I hardly think there is anything I can do about it. Being a student in a boarding school will always be a security risk.”

House Black can’t afford me not being at Hogwarts, the slope of his smile and the tilt of his jaw say.

“That is, unfortunately, true,” says Grandfather. “We can’t pull you out yet, so we will do the next best thing and saddle you with a security team.”

“Has there ever been a private security team at Hogwarts?” Itachi asks, curious.

“Not to my knowledge.”

Itachi shares a morbidly amused smile with Grandfather. What an unpleasant precedent to set. Oh, while they’re on the topic. “Will Auror Shacklebolt be joining us?”

“Not today. We sent them copies of credible threats made against you yesterday. He and his team took them seriously. They are run off their feet.”

“Death threats.” Itachi shakes his head. “What a bizarrely self-defeating thing to do. Are threatening letters even legal?”

“Not at all,” says Lady Drozdova, the first words he’s heard speak since they were introduced. “You are still very much a minor, Heir or not. From a practical perspective, most such letters would be ignored. Your case is somewhat specific, however. House Black can both afford the costs and can expand the time to address each one.”

Goodness. “Whatever you think is best,” he says, trying and failing to inject some sense of gravitas into his voice. The matter is just so *trivial*. “As you can imagine, I have no issue with a security team. It shouldn’t harm my—image—much, since nobody expects me to be any good at magic.”

“I hoped your practical streak would carry over to this,” says Arcturus, the deep note of satisfaction making him look at least ten years younger. “Master Prott will be in charge of choosing and leading the team that will guard you for the rest of the year.”

Mm. “I look forward to working with you, Master Prott,” Itachi says, in his best adult voice. It’s all sorts of creepy, he knows. While Prott looks to be the consummate professional, Itachi can spot where the cracks in his composure are forming. “My Head of House requested I schedule a meeting of the three of us so that we can discuss the practicalities of the operation.”

“Of course, Heir Black,” says Prott, tone a bit too even to be anything but disconcerted. “The rest of my team will arrive tomorrow, but our contract has already started. We can meet with Madam Woodward tonight if you wish.”

“Perfect.” Prott really was a good choice. “I will, of course, have to run it by her, but I expect her to be reasonable. Especially since the matter of my accommodation is one of the questions we need to address.”

“As you wish.”

Well, if nothing else the man’s determination to do his job well in the face of strange children is admirable.

“So—the Prophet,” he says, turning to his family. “I don’t read it, of course, but the secondary effects of their nonsense are exhausting. Can anything be done?”

“Something is being done,” says Lady Drozdova. “The wizard who reported the story is in custody, and several civil suits are in the works. As for the rest of it—the media can speculate, as long as their words don’t pose a credible threat to your safety. They are limited in what they can outright state, but not in what they can imply.”

“One can’t stop the media.” The ice crept back into Lady Dorea’s tone, making her sound as unapproachable as she presents herself. “One can only re-direct them. We don’t need the courts, we need a counter-narrative. A media campaign with Sirius as our centrepiece.”

Itachi looks at her and thinks: alright. I’ve played ball. I’ve agreed to attend this school and go to your events and wear your clothes and be separated from my brother.

“No.”

The attention on him intensifies. Nobody is crass enough to physically tense, but the air tastes of anticipation.

“No?"

“No. I am not going to play the media game. I will not sit through interviews and photos and pretend like any of this is in any way acceptable. I am eleven. My brother is nine.”

Just in case you forgot. What is wrong with you people? What has possessed you to think you can talk media strategy with an eleven-year-old civilian child?

“You will do what you have to do, Heir Black,” says Aunt Dorea. The pleasant tone drags against something raw in him; a wound that hasn’t even scabbed over yet, much less healed.

“In the interest of keeping this meeting productive, I think you should back off, Lady Potter. I will not make the situation worse for myself but I am not a freak-show exhibit and you will not corral me into being one. You, honestly, don’t have the power to do so.”

Lady Potter, to her credit, doesn’t seem to be aggravated in any way. Excellent, since Itachi didn’t set out to do so. He just made them aware that he does, in fact, have a line.

“We-ell,” drawls Cassie. “He’s got you there, ‘Rea. And you call yourself a Hufflepuff? Where is your sense of blind loyalty? Your endless capacity to see the good in others?”

“I am a Black before I am a Hufflepuff. I am myself before I am a Black. Like it or not, I deserve a modicum of dignity. I have kept it through my years with Orion and Walburga Black and I will keep it now.”

Itachi is distantly aware of his Grandfather’s considering gaze, but it’s not him he needs to work things out with. He doesn’t doubt Aunt Dorea’s good intentions; she sent James a priceless gift, cementing her family’s standing with the Blacks. That said, he will not be a pushover, either.

“There is dignity, nephew, and there is foolishness. You need to compromise. I want three interviews and three written statements.”

Itachi inclines his head. This is the type of conversation he can get behind. “One interview, three public events and I can write however many statements you wish me to. It’s not like I read the—publications.”

“Agreed.” Aunt Dorea’s blank expression shifts into a pleased smirk, and Itachi can practically see James’ image superimposed over her face. They don’t even look alike much; colouring aside, Lady Potter is all Black. “Pleasure doing business with you, nephew. Our earlier praise was not misplaced. Keep your fire, and I won’t have to worry about the fate of any Noble House entrusted to your care.”

Amaterasu above.

“Thank you, Aunt Dorea,” he says, curving his lips into a half-smile. “I will take negotiating things like these, unpleasant as they might be, over dealing with Hogwarts and her students. By all means, summon me every day. Anything to keep me away from the children.”

Aunt Cassie barks a laugh, but Arcturus isn’t as serene. “I don’t have any way to help you, there,” he says, a bit grim. “You are where you must be.”

“I was considering testing out of a year or two,” he says, trying out the idea. “But then Regulus would be alone for even longer. It’s a process, Healer Rosier tells me. I will, reportedly, get used to the gossiping and the mindless group-think and the rest of it.”

“If you do decide to test out, I would appreciate the warning,” says Dorea. “I don’t know what James would do but it would be public, explosive and memorable.”

Itachi smiles a little further. “He would likely test out with me. As would my badgers.”

“Ah, yes,” drawls Cassie, teetering on the edge of mean and curious. “Your mudbloods. You’ve got quite a menagerie, don’t you? All the Purebloods worth having, including Longbottom somehow, the disgraced pseudo-Prince and, what, three mudbloods?”

Itachi considers getting into it with her. His look probably goes on for a bit too long, because her smile loses the pleasant edge and becomes all fight. Huh. She could be a real idealist, a Pureblood fanatic, but—He doesn’t think so?

“I still consider myself a Dark Pureblood,” he says instead. “I am in no way swayed by the Light’s ideology. That doesn’t impact my choice of allies at all, or how I value them. All my allies are equal and invaluable and *mine*.” He pauses for a second—something about that sentence isn’t completely right—ah. “James is a special case,” he allows. “He publicly claimed me. He is a cut above the rest.”

“I would have more to say about it if it wasn’t such an effective strategy,” says Arcturus. Itachi imagines that grandfather would have a similar expression if he were to declare that he

will start sleeping with centaurs. He obviously considers Itachi's attachment to his badgers to be some sort of unhealthy fetish, but the fetish came with valuable social currency attached. "As it is, you have almost single-handedly flipped the narrative on its head. Nobody can call you a Pureblood Supremacist now without looking deranged."

Pray I never go into politics, Itachi thinks, not unkindly. It's not the Muggleborns you need to worry about, it's the Socialists. I would tax the daylights out of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, and you have no idea.

"The date of the trial has been moved up to the eleventh of October, to be heard by the Wizengamot," Arcturus continues, blatantly changing the topic without an ounce of shame. "House Black will recuse itself. You will be called as a witness."

"Are they putting Orion on trial post-mortem," asks Itachi, frowning. "That seems a little inappropriate. Speak well of the dead and all that."

"No, and thank Merlin for that. No, it's Walburga's trial. Since her case is linked so closely to Orion's, and the security of the Ministry holding cells has been called into question, they rushed it to lower the risk of anything happening."

Itachi makes a meaningless noise in the back of his throat. The trial isn't high on his list of worries. "I'd have it tomorrow if I could. The quicker that mess gets sorted out, the quicker we can move on to more important things."

"Right there with you, kid," says Aunt Cassie. "The sheer volume of nonsense that has been spun in the recent weeks is getting on my nerves. The Wizengamot normally meets six to twelve times a year. Ask me how many emergency sessions have been held in the past month. Go ahead."

Itachi, nobody's idiot, settles for sending her a smirk. "I sympathise ever so much. Tell you what, Aunt Cassie, how about we order a gallon of Polyjuice and I sit in the Wizengamot meetings, file all your paperwork and do the whole song and dance. Meanwhile, you can sit in my first-year Charms classes and listen to the children whisper about how your complexion is a result of a blood-magic ritual involving a herd of unicorns and a pound of fae wings."

Aunt Cassie barks a delighted laugh, leaning back into her seat. “And I just bet you’d run the con as well as you do everything else. Honestly, bratling, if I couldn’t taste the family magic on you, I’d be checking you for Polyjuice either way. Whatever the fuck this family did to you, this is not how an eleven-year-old acts.”

“Thank you,” he says. What is there to say? She’s not wrong.

“Alright,” says Arcturus. “Let’s turn our attention to the Prophet again, shall we? Sirius, you mentioned two interviews. Before you do any such thing, this is what you need to know—”

Itachi, far calmer than he was coming in, settles in for an exhausting slug through trivia. Why this is important, is anyone’s guess, but Aunt Dorea is sitting next to him, giving every impression of interest. If she is spending her valuable time on this, it’s more than Itachi’s life is worth to bring it up.

Arcturus and Lady Drozdova give him a crash course in media relations for a bit over two hours. Lady Potter’s condensed version follows next, and it boils down to: be as arrogant as you can manage, never say anything personal unless you absolutely can’t help it and threaten to sue if a reporter asks for a statement without the permission of your legal guardian. Assume that everything you say to a classmate will be reported sooner rather than later and behave as if you are watched at all times, because you are. Itachi likes her version better. It makes sense.

“Alright.” Arcturus says after they edge into ‘dinner’ territory. “Dorea, Cassie and I have an appointment with the Headmaster in ten minutes. Lady Drozdova, we would appreciate your insight as well. Sirius, I strongly suggest you nail down the security arrangement with Master Prott and remember to include Regulus in your planning. There will be no living with that child unless he gets to visit you at least once every second day.”

“I’m sure Master Prott will be reasonable about the matter,” says Itachi, sending the man the sweetest look he can produce. “I realise we are not well acquainted, but surely any packet he was given included how happy I am about being separated from Regulus.”

“Oh, he knows,” says Aunt Cassie. “He and the rest of the world. It’s been wild, kid. I’ll make sure to visit you as often as I can. The staff frowns on family visits, but they also don’t know what to do with a kid that should by all rights be sobbing in a padded cell.”

Itachi sends her a fond look. “Yes, thank you, Aunt Cassie. Very kind of you. Merry part.”

“Think nothing of it. Merry part, darling.”

“Take care, nephew,” orders Aunt Dorea. “It is clear to everyone that Potters stand with you. You’ve gathered an impressive list of allies for the two weeks you’ve attended this school. Use what resources you have and stay alert.”

“Thank you,” he says, bowing a little. “I will doubtlessly see you soon. Merry part.”

The three witches leave the room, with a last ‘Merry part’ exchanged with Lady Drozdova. Arcturus hesitates for a moment, looking at Itachi with a complicated expression. Is it—concerned? Expectant? Troubled?

“You would, though? Ask for help? This is not a rhetorical question, Sirius, I am genuinely worried we’ve conditioned you to handle your problems yourself, to the point it wouldn’t occur to you that you can do otherwise. So, would it?”

Itachi hums, a little taken aback at the choppy monologue. Grandfather has made a conscious effort to be less formal with Itachi and Regulus as their relationship progressed, but this is still out of the ordinary. “Within reason,” he says, measuring each word. “I am not troubled, Grandfather. I understand why I must be here and I do not resent it. Well—I do not resent it now that Regulus has a clear method of visiting.”

“That is a complete non-answer, Sirius.” Arcturus sighs but he smiles too, so Itachi counts it as a win, on balance. “Very well. I must go. Write often, child, and continue to make us proud. Merry part.”

“Merry part.”

For what it’s worth, Lord Black leaves without hesitation, swallowing the space with long strides. The click-clack of his boots provides a fitting background sound for Itachi’s upcoming conversation with his future head of security. Imagine—Itachi Uchiha with a security team. Kisame would laugh until the end of times. Goodness, even Nagato would eke out a chuckle.

“Well, Master Prott, it seems like we have a lot to discuss,” he says, words lilting a little with amusement.

“Yes, Heir Black.”

Lady, but this will be a fun one to feed to Timothy—or even James, on days Itachi feels extra vindictive.

“Please,” he says, taking a seat next to the stiff wizard, “call me Sirius. There is no need for formality. You will be with me at all times.”

“Whenever it would be conscionable for me to do so,” is the wary response.

“A very good point,” he purrs. “Very good point, indeed. How about this—I haven’t had dinner yet, and I am on a strict diet, as you might be already aware of. Why don’t you and I stop by the Great Hall so I can collect some of your clients by proxy, and we can all retreat to the kitchens for the meal?”

“Yes, Heir Black.”

Very fun. Very unwise; if the man is to have any hope of surviving Itachi and his nonsense, he best become used to holding his own. But fun, also.

“Splendid. Off we go, then.”

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Badgers badger

(Thursday, Sep 16th 1971)

The shocked silence in the Great Hall once Itachi walks in with his gallant knight-guard is spectacular. He should have, perhaps, notified the staff beforehand. Alas.

“I think we should meet the staff first,” he begins to say to Prott, when—

“Darling—” James slinks across the Hall, a beatific smile stretching his lips, chaos swirling in the hazel eyes. “Who might this be, then? I leave you for half a day and you get yourself a handsome older wizard. Bad form, ducky, bad form.”

Itachi is still parsing through the little monologue, trying to pinpoint the most outrageous part—ducky, definitely ducky—by the time James finished oozing his way into his space and hooked his jaw over his shoulder.

Should he? On one hand, he shouldn’t. Then again—He relaxes into James’ larger frame, back to chest. If they’re making a spectacle, they might as well do it properly “James, meet Master Prott, my newly-instated head of security. Master Prott—Heir James Potter of the Noble House Potter, my cousin and close companion. I imagine you will see a lot of each other in the coming months.”

If he wasn’t standing as close to James as he was, he’d have missed the tensing of the boy’s muscles. His jovial expression is flawless. “Head of security, you say? How interesting.”

“As I said, it’s a new development.”

The entire Hall, Professors very much included, watches the ongoing production of Sirius and the Chaos Monster. For once, Itachi doesn’t mind. The whole point of the security team is to serve as a deterrent. Publicising it is appropriate and useful.

“Merry meet, Heir Potter.” Bless his heart, Prott is determined to stick to his ‘hired muscle’ performance. No amount of professionalism or training will allow him to blend in, but he is trying to compensate by being so boring the children will move on to more interesting pursuits. It’s a naive strategy, honestly, but fun to observe.

“Merry meet,” says James, playful coo very much a threat even if the poor wizard doesn’t know it yet.

“I had a most—riveting—meeting with Lady Potter,” Itachi says, craning his head so he can meet James’ eyes. “She’s in a meeting with the Headmaster now, but perhaps you can catch her on her way out.”

“Would that I could,” says James, voice dipping into a very well-executed woebegone sigh. “I have detention. What were you discussing?”

“This and that,” he hedges, mindful of the audience. “More of this, less of that. You know how it is. Speaking of, I must inform our benevolent overlords of Master Prott’s presence. You’re welcome to come with.”

James hums, high and lilting. “I’d love nothing more. However, I must inform Frank before he—”

“Sirius,” says Frank from three steps behind them. Itachi looks at Master Prott who doesn’t so much as twitch at the boy’s approach. Good man. Maybe you will live through this mess after all. “James. Merry meet. I am so curious, you two, I couldn’t stop myself. ”

“I agree,” says Prefect Moss.

The urge to rub his temples like an old, old man is almost too strong to ignore. “Gentlewizards,” he says, as waspishly as possible when James Potter is draped over his back. “Merry meet. If you all might find it in your hearts to be patient a little longer, I have to report the reasons for Master Prott’s presence to Madam Woodward and Professor McGonagall.”

James shakes with suppressed laughter, hiding a part of his face in Itachi’s hair. The gesture is earnest, which helps nudge it from outrageously intimate to alarming, but ultimately harmless.

“Mister Black,” says Professor McGonagall from the Head Table. “If you could stop disturbing the meal, I would appreciate it.”

Amaterasu be kind.

“Not a word.” He pats James’ hand, twists out of his hold as smoothly as possible and straightens out the lines of his robes. “Master Prott, if you would please come with me. The Deputy Headmistress is not a witch to be kept waiting.”

The peanut gallery follows, of course, gaining at least three children by the time Itachi and Prott had made the ten paces to the head table.

“I apologise for my rudeness and the spectacle, Deputy Headmistress,” he says, bowing his head. “I had hoped Grandfather would handle this matter personally. Unfortunately, he is currently in a meeting with the Headmaster, so it falls to me. May I introduce Master Prott, the leader of the security team hired by Lord Black to protect me.”

“This is highly unorthodox,” she says, not at all amused. “You are a student, Mister Black, and are in no way authorised to handle this matter. I cannot sign off on anything until a staff meeting has been held.”

“Understood, Professor. However, Grandfather left me in the care of Master Prott for the foreseeable future. I will follow your instructions as to how to proceed from here.”

There; perfect. Wait—not perfect; he’s left Prott out of the discussion. He sends him a questioning look, but the man refuses to engage. Alright then, big and buff it is.

“They can eat in my office, Minerva,” says Professor Woodward, her background in healing shining through. “I can supervise.”

Professor McGonagall purses her lips, dissatisfaction written plainly on her face. “This will mean you will be unable to attend the staff meeting.”

“Send me a message when you plan to begin, and I will come. Master Prott could come with me. His presence and duties are the ones in question, after all.”

A small not-sound comes out of Prott’s throat. Something like a suggestion of a throat clearing; a space that implies the theoretical presence of an otherwise inappropriate noise. Very polite, very well-bred. Not the high nobility, he doesn’t think; they rarely bother to learn the truly involved details of etiquette. No, that’s for the lower caste, still Noble but without the buffer provided by immoral wealth and political power.

“Apologies, Professors. I am, of course, happy to answer any questions you might have, but I will not be separated from Mister Black until there is someone from my team to relieve me.”

Well, well. Look at this little nugget of professionalism. It’s a bit nostalgic. Itachi hadn’t been on many protection missions, but he can appreciate the aesthetic of one just fine.

“Mister Black cannot attend a staff meeting,” says Professor McGonagall. “That would be almost as inappropriate as having this conversation in the Great Hall.”

Prott inclines his head slightly. “I am not opposed to escorting Heir Black to Castle Black until the matter is settled. Those are, I am afraid, the only options. I go where he goes until

the rest of my team arrives."

"Out of the question," dismisses Professor Woodward. "I stand *in loco parentis*. You will not find it easy to pry him from my claws."

Well, then. The bizarre background buzz of conversation gains a little energy. Especially from the red-and-gold quarter. They would find the statement inspirational, wouldn't they?

"Which brings us back to dinner, Professors," he says, as evenly as he can. Calm is not a resource he is blessed with at the best of times. Now that he's hungry, cold and overwhelmed, it's a very scarce resource indeed.

"Bring Black to the meeting," says Kettleburn of all random wizards. "It will be amusing if nothing else. The boy is hardly a disruptive presence—if one discounts all the ways his very existence can be counted as disruptive."

"I agree," says Professor Flitwick, followed by the rest of the Professors, the last one being the DADA Professor that Itachi can't name after two weeks of lessons.

Professor McGonagall looks about as happy as Itachi is patient. "Very well. Mister Black, follow your Head of House to her office. Master Prott, I will not prevent you from following. Expect to be summoned later tonight."

She starts to sit back down in her seat, and Itachi for once feels a small stab of pleasure at being, well, a terrible nuisance. "Actually Professor, I had hoped to invite a few of my close associates to share the meal with me. They will be as impacted by my security team as I will be. It's only fair."

Not a single decipherable expression is to be found on McGonagall's face. She looks to be locked into the state of an adult whose processing power is invested into not screaming at an obstinate child loudly and at length.

Professor Woodward, on the other hand, angles her brows into an expression of approval. “Very thoughtful. I cannot speak for anyone outside of my badgers, but you are free to invite who you wish within Hufflepuff.”

“Professor, if I may—”

“You have detention, James Potter,” snaps Professor McGonagall. “Do not even start.”

“Not for an hour,” he replies, undaunted. “And if, say, Head Boy Longbottom escorts me to and from the meal with my cousin, he can make sure I won’t skip it.”

“There has been enough rule-breaking. Mister Black’s circumstances are extraordinary, and they warrant a little leniency. Yours are not. Sit at your house table, Mister Potter, and finish your dinner.”

Irritation stabs through Itachi, cooling his expression a little. Any kidnapper with half a mind would correctly judge the children around Itachi to be his biggest weakness. This is doubly true for James, a Heir in his own right. He has no idea what can be done about it, but his priorities are clear. Whatever game of intimidation is being played here, he knows on which side he stands. Without a pause, he turns his back on the faculty and makes his way to his cousin.

James is, for once, visibly upset, without a shred of a jovial expression in sight. Itachi meets his eyes and tries to communicate as much determination as possible. “I will keep you informed,” he says, the chill in his voice not working towards his goal of offering reassurance. “Quick side question: what does your detention tonight look like?”

“Filch,” James says, taking the chance to re-group. His smile is brittle around the edges, eyes a bit too lidded and lips a bit too pressed for it to look genuine. Good effort, though. “Eight until ten.”

“Good to know, good to know. Well, in any case—”

“Fifteen points from Hufflepuff,” says Professor McGonagall, not even trying to filter our anger from her voice. “All of you, back to your seats. Black, you have your instructions. Away with the lot of you.”

Itachi twists his head around enough to nod at her, lips pursing in a half-sneer, half-smirk. Oh, do you mind that the children are undermining your authority? Tough. Itachi doesn’t expect any real help from the staff, but that has consequences.

“Come,” says Woodward, an oasis of calm amidst flaring tempers. “Your dinner will be served at my office. Warnock, Clarke, Young, with me. Moss, you will make sure our House behaves. ”

Itachi clasps James’ shoulder once, gripping a little harder than necessary. He will figure this out somehow.

The procession out of the Great Hall is ridiculous even by Itachi’s standards. His badgers are bewildered, the childish sense of adventure being the only thing that keeps them going.

“Chin up,” he says, taking a stab at a reassuring tone. “All of this is pointless Pureblood drama. I had hoped to spare you the spectacle, but Grandfather was even more proactive than I had assumed.”

“No worries,” says Noah, convincing no one. “This is a good thing. Your guard looks awesome. So fierce.”

He can hear you, Itachi thinks fondly. You adorable little puppy.

“Master Prott is by all accounts an eminently capable wizard.”

“You realise your cousin will raise Hell, right,” says Timothy, with a furtive glance towards Professor Woodward ahead of them. “He has already—allegedly, mind—been very vocal about where he stands regarding your—thing.”

“James has every right to be here,” he says, mood plummeting. “Master Prott will guard him almost as much as he will guard us. Denying James the chance to get comfortable with the wizard that will be around him for the next year is unconscionable.”

Timothy frowns, mulling this over. “That’s true. I didn’t think about that. No wonder you were so prissy with Professor McGonagall. It’s not like any of them had offered to help.”

“Oh, I am nowhere near done. I’ve half a mind to report to Lady Potter, sit back and watch the destruction unfold. The only reason Aunt Dorea hasn’t set a security team on James already is because it is understood that whoever guards me will guard him, too.”

“Wait—how could Mister Prott—”

“Alright, in you go,” says Professor Woodward. They’re here already? He hadn’t even noticed.

The Elves had gone ahead and re-decorated the office to include a table for six, filled with food and drink. Itachi’s seat is, as per usual, marked off with a Canis Major sign.

A problem arises very soon.

“Master Prott, I implore you to sit down. I sympathise with the complexity of your position, I do, but the purpose of this meeting is to build a working relationship.”

“All due respect, Heir Black, that would be inappropriate. I am here to keep you safe.”

Must everything be a struggle? He lets his eyes slip closed for a long moment, gathering his composure. It's fine. This is fine. The man is doing his job, and doing it well. No need to get worked up about it.

Timothy jumps in to help. "Merry meet, Mister Prott," he says, in his most chipper tone. "My name is Timothy Warnock. I'm a friend of Siri. It's wonderful to meet you."

"Honour, Master Warnock."

"Wonderful, thank you. So, listen. I don't want to tell you how to do your job or anything. I am sure you are very experienced. But, out of curiosity, have you ever had a very difficult client? Demanding, unreasonable, things like that?"

Itachi straightens from his slight slouch. Each word from the boy's mouth takes with it a dollop of angst from Itachi's shoulders. He can't wait for Timothy to be old enough to have children of his own.

Prott re-settles his weight in an unmistakable gesture of uncertainty. "I can't disclose information about my past clients."

"Right, of course you can't; silly of me to ask. Hypothetically, though, you can imagine a client like that, yeah? Difficult, prissy types, who think they know best. Headstrong, arrogant, etcetera etcetera."

A spark of caution enters Prott's eyes. Itachi is beyond curious about what he sees in Timothy. A sparkly-eyed cherub, without a hint of guile to be seen? A pleasant, kind, naive little boy?

"I can imagine such a scenario."

Timothy beams, lips stretched in a warm, inviting smile. "Thank you for indulging me. You are very kind. Now, imagine a client. A boy, let's say. The noblest of the noble, raised in the

lap of luxury; has way too much power for his age. On top of that, he's known to be, like, insanely smart."

The look that Prott sends Timothy is flat enough to be poetry of motion and gesture.

"I can see you can picture it. So, hypothetically of course, how much of a nightmare do you think that boy could be, if he got it in his mind you were the enemy? An obstacle to be worked around?"

"I'm sure a Noble Heir would act in a way befitting his station." It's clear Prott's heart is not in it. Timothy is not being especially subtle, after all.

"Exactly," beams Timothy. "These Ancient and Noble kids, they are known to be reasonable, are they? This station you mention, it teaches these children to be very down-to-earth, would you say? Salt-of-the-earth? Wouldn't dream of, say, making a hard-working man's life difficult in any way?"

Itachi considers, not for the first time, that he should adopt Timothy, proclaim him the new Heir Black and consider his job done.

Prott sends Professor Woodward a look so filled with exasperated despair, that the old witch's lips curve in an unmistakably amused smile. "I suggest you cut your losses, Master Prott, and sit down with the children. The Wards around my office would give Grindelwald pause."

After a final moment of indecision, Prott's eyebrows tighten, and he exhales explosively. "Fine. Alright, you vicious little monsters. You get your way." He slumps into a chair, face transformed from the professional blank facade into a much more approachable young wizard. "I hate this job so much."

"Hi," chirps Timothy. "Lovely to meet you—what's your name? You look to be my brother's age, I can't call you Master Prott. 'S weird. You can call me Tim if you want, 's much easier."

Prott rubs a weary hand over his eyes, head tilted back towards the ceiling. “My name is Garnall. You may call me Nal in private. Everybody does. Garnall is a ridiculous name.”

“Merry meet, Garnall,” Itachi says. Nicknames are for well-adjusted children. “Thank you for indulging us. I realise we are putting you in an unenviable position.”

The contrast is stark. His professional facade was impressive too, but he is much lovelier like this, full of energy and movement. “Listen, if I have to be normal, then so do you. Drop the formalities, kid.”

“Oh, that’s how Siri is,” says Andrew with a wide, foxy smile. “We’re working on it. Hi, I’m Andrew.”

“Hi, kid. And you, Little Red?”

Noah, almost entirely hidden behind his hair, nods. “Hi, Garnall—Nal, sorry. I’m Noah. Hi.”

“Super. Well, now that my will has been shattered by eleven-year-old children, how do you want to play this? I can’t allow any informality in public, you understand? I might be mostly ornamental, but you are in real danger, Black.”

Itachi meets his eyes and inclines his head. “I am aware. As soon as Lord Riddle felt it necessary to inform me of the rumours himself, I knew there is no time for games.”

Prott’s eyes widen and his posture straightens, leaning forward in his seat a little. “Riddle—Marvolo Riddle? You have Marvolo fucking Riddle as a *pen-pal*?”

Madam Woodward clears her throat, which causes the wizard to hunch into himself a little, but his eyes remain fixed on Itachi.

“Are you acquainted? I don’t know if I should congratulate you on the wide span of your connections, or commiserate with the dangerous nature of your work.”

Prott blinks once, twice, three times. “Merlin, you do talk like that, you creepy, creepy child. I am not acquainted with Riddle, thank Circe. He threw me around a few times in duelling championships, back when the mad bast—back when he competed.”

It’s Itachi’s turn to blink, dazed at the very thought. “That must have been a spectacular show,” he says. “It’s a shame he doesn’t compete anymore.” However, that does bring up an interesting avenue. While that sort of pageantry rubs against his Shinobi roots, it would be a good place to learn about practical battle magic. “With that said, I am eleven. Lord Riddle tolerates me because I invested considerable resources in being what he considers tolerable.”

Prott makes a sharp noise in the back of his throat. “Spectacular show, he says. Shame he doesn’t compete, he says. I hate this job even more, somehow.”

“I would have thought that having Lord Riddle on my side is a good thing,” says Itachi, mouth quirking. He only has so much sympathy. House Black is wackadoo, everybody knows that. A Hit Wizard should *definitely* know that. "Certainly better than the alternative."

“Sure. I suppose I should have known better than to get myself involved in this nightmare.”

Precisely, yes.

“I’m sure it won’t be that bad,” says Timothy. Polite tone said, there is something in his tightening shoulders and the angle of his chin that reads as offended. The darling child is offended on Itachi’s behalf.

Prott sees it too, and sighs, rubbing his eyes again. “Don’t mind me, kid. I’m whinging for the sake of it. Being around you Noble kids always gives me the urge to ruffle your hair and give you a bunny to pet.”

“Please do,” says Itachi, not anybody’s idiot. “Not the hair, but the bunny. I love bunnies.”

“Fuck,” sighs Prott, and cringes again at Madam Woodward’s pointed look. “Alright, alright. I’ll keep it kid-friendly, yeah? Sorry again for being a—a jerk about this. We’re all a bit tense about your situation.”

Itachi sobers up. “Oh?”

Prott grimaces, sliding back halfway to the real adult performance. “It’s—Not good. In cases like this, when kids are involved, every lead is going to lead to *something* terrible. We’ve been stumbling in and out of depravities by *accident* and—” He exhales a slow, calming breath. “But none of it is on you. We’re going to get you through this, don’t worry.”

Itachi nods, sending him a commiserating look. “I regret you were dragged into this. I can’t imagine that witches and wizards paying me close attention as a result of all this are anything but deeply unpleasant.”

“I hate to interrupt,” says Professor Woodward with a rather pointed look. “But there are some logistics for us to discuss. Master Prott, I understand you and your team will be guarding Mister Black overnight as well?”

Prott blinks and makes a sound, halfway between a huff and a scoff. “Overnight? I’d shrink a team member and place them in his book bag if I could. The kid will be covered in portkeys before the week is out, and that’s before his Lord drowns him in enchanted jewellery.”

“Perhaps it would be best,” says Professor Woodward, expression even, “if you share some of the more—relevant pieces of information regarding Mister Black’s case. It seems more concrete coordination is necessary.”

“I mean, sure,” says Prott, with an uncomfortable little smile. “I don’t know why you would want the nightmares, personally. That said, I can’t release the details about any raids we ran. You’ll have to go to the ICW for that. Or Shacklebolt, for some of the local stuff.”

“Share what you can as soon as possible, if you would. Now, I have given it some thought and have decided to allow the dorm room to be split this year. Not only have all the inhabitants asked for such, but the staff will in all likelihood take issue with adults living in the dorm.”

“We are licensed,” Prott says, expression shuttering. “Extensively. I can’t say I appreciate the insinuation.”

Yikes. “They should have the choice,” Itachi says. “The kids, I mean. They didn’t ask for this.”

Woodward sends him a chilly smile. “The only possible path forward that I can see is that you, Mister Black, are given rooms separate from the dorms, to reside in with your security team.”

Huh.

“And us,” says Andrew. “His security team and us.”

Darling children. If he wasn’t so selfish, he’d already be teaching the badgers to be less self-sacrificing.

Woodward leans her head to the side, eyes jumping between the children, Itachi and Garnall. “And why would I allow that?”

Timothy goggles at her, eyes wide with pure, earnest disbelief. “Was complete segregation on the table?”

“Theoretically, it is, yes. An argument can be made that it is the most responsible path forward. The fact is that Mister Black has been advised that attending Hogwarts is not the safest option for him.”

“I’d quit, for sure,” says Andrew. “It’s not like it would be the end of the world. If I know Siri, he’d drown us in gold and tutors, ‘cause he would have felt bad.”

“Absolutely,” says Timothy. “Likewise. Noah too, right?” Noah nods behind his hair. “It’s not even loyalty? I don’t *want* to go to an evil school, and things are pretty evil already. I get that it’s not all on you, but Siri is already shunned and made fun of and *attacked—”*

*“*I mean,” Itachi feels it necessary to point out, “let’s not overstate things.” He sends Prott what he hopes is a soothing look. “It’s nonsense. Prank spells, insults. Nothing to worry about.”

“Except you’re *sick*, and you’re not allowed to use magic,” Andrew says sweetly. “And they’re *idiots.* If a miscast tickling spell hits you at the wrong times and stops your heart, will it matter that it was a prank?”

Prott is looking increasingly grim, which is not the direction he wants this conversation to take.

“That won’t happen,” he says. “And I’ll be cleared to cast sooner or later. And Master Prott is here. So.”

“I don’t like the suggestion that they’re separating you so the crazy murderer that slips through their security doesn’t harm any other kids,” Timothy says, mouth set in a stubborn line. “Cause that would be the only reason we can’t stay with you.”

“It’s not fair,” Noah says, eyes trained to the ground. He looks miserable, the poor thing. “I don’t understand how it’s legal. Sirius is paying tuition and, since he’s a Noble Pureblood Prince God whatever, I understand he is paying a lot more than I am. He is owed stuff for that money.”

Prott makes an impressed hum, which serves as a nice backdrop to Professor Woodward’s pleased smile. Itachi, of course, is almost buoyant, that’s how proud he is.

“I agree,” says Professor Woodward. “You would make for good advocates. You especially, Mister Young.”

Noah squeaks and ducks back behind Andrew, the lamb.

“Now, as your Head of House, I have a more or less unquestioned right to decide what happens to my badgers, while in school. Therefore, I will allow you to choose. You can remain in the dorms, or you can reside in Mister Black’s private chambers.”

“When would this start,” asks Itachi. “Tonight?”

“The Elves are preparing the chambers as we speak. As I said, as your Head of House, my word goes. If the Headmaster decides to over-rule me, he will have a fight on his hands that, and I say this with humility, he doesn’t want.” A little sideways smile tilts her lips. “As for the security, I imagine Master Prott and his team will prefer to set it up themselves.”

Prott scrambles up from his chair. “This is the best news I heard all week, Professor. May I inform some of my people? I can’t have my kids—pardon, Heir Black and his friends—sleep in an unsecured location.”

Madam Woodward nods, still as inscrutable as ever. “Go ahead. They won’t, of course, be granted entry to the school before appropriate screening, but you are welcome to share the news.”

“Fuc—Fantastic!” Prott flexes his wrist in an absentminded manner, releasing his wand from his sleeve. “*Expecto Patronum*.”

A ghostly otter materialises into existence, every bit as lovely as you would expect a blue-silver conjuration of an otter to be. “We have good news, Lali. The school is letting us have private rooms for the kid. We get to set the Wards, the security, the whole deal. I’ll coordinate with the Headmaster to get you and yours in by tonight.”

So that's how it looks on this end, wonders Itachi. His Susanō might be unwieldy for discrete message delivery, but as far as speed goes, this is unmatched.

"I don't suppose you would be willing to teach me that variation of the Patronus," he says, because why not try?

Prott waves a dismissive hand at him for a beat, before cutting off the gesture abruptly. "Not for a good few—wait, no, shit—sorry Professor. You can—you *can*, can't you, you creepy fuc—frigging child—"

A bubble of amusement twists itself from the confused swirl of emotions sitting heavy in Itachi's belly. This little ramble is so nostalgic. For a beautiful moment, Prott was Shisui come to life again.

"I can cast the Patronus, yes," he says, letting his tone lighten a little. "I would imagine the process isn't quite the same when the purpose is so different."

"You bet your freaky little face I will teach you," beams Prott, smile wide and manic. "As far as security goes, having a sure-try way to call for help—"

Madam Woodward huffs, an old, creaking sound of tired patience. "As impressive as your accomplishment might be, you will not be casting any outrageously exhaustive magic any time soon, Mister Black."

Speaking of. "Of course, Professor, I wouldn't dream of it. That does bring up an issue I wanted to talk to you about. The sunberries we ate yesterday." Was it only yesterday? "I think that, as far as magical exhaustion goes, I'm healed. Would you mind scheduling a consultation with Madam Febru?"

"Sunberries," scoffs Professor Woodward. "If ever there was a *stupid* thing to do, Mister Black, it was to consume a pound of one of the strongest magical stimulants on the planet in one sitting. You already have an appointment with Healer Febru tomorrow at 09.30.

Representatives from your private team of Healers will arrive at the school at 13.00. Best believe, we will not let your reckless experiment go unchecked."

Joy. "Thank you, Professor," he says as honestly as he can. Which is not a lot. Healers are harrowing; always have been.

"Alright. Now that we've discussed all the pressing issues, you four children and your Master Prott will eat. Especially you, Mister Black. I will count your skipping a meal as an outright act of aggression, I'm afraid."

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Introductions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Thursday, Sep 16 th 1971)

A llama patronus glides in as they're finishing with dessert.

"Nal, you piece of shit," says the llama in a wonderfully urbane, feminine drawl, just the other side of too deep. "You know I'm in Argentina, the raid was your idea. Best believe I will pluck the blood vessels from your twitching carcass if I end up with mosquito bites in unspeakable places for nothing."

"Oh shit—Argentina—Professor, I have to get to your nearest Floo. Can you mind the kids for a minute?"

"I will take you to the other room. You can fill me in on some of the details, perhaps? Such as why one of your teammates tasked with guarding one Sirius Black, residing primarily in Scotland, is in Argentina?"

The two adults bicker politely—or, to be more precise, Madam Woodward is implacably old and wise at Prott who looks more and more like a hunted schoolchild—as they walk out of the room, leaving Itachi and his kids a few minutes of privacy.

Timothy doesn't waste a moment. He whirls over to Itachi, eyes huge. "Siri—holy hell, Siri, what a mess! Are you in any way okay?"

Itachi blinks, not sure what the truth is, much less how to verbalise it in an appropriately child-friendly manner.

“Today was—a lot,” he settles for, after a beat. “I’m okay. For all the drama, nothing of substance has changed.”

“God,” says Timothy, radiating stress so intensely that it almost hangs around him in a visible cloud. “I can’t even disagree; nothing much has changed, other than a whole lot of gossip and arguing.”

“Oh,” he asks. “Are people still coming to you for gossip about me?”

“Not with me.” Andrew’s lips curve in a sharp little smile. “Or Tim. They still try with Noah here and there. It’s all very dull.”

“I don’t even know why they would think I was their best bet,” says Noah, brow furrowed, blue eyes wide and confused. “Tim would at least be sweet about it. I just throw them at ‘Drew and keep my head down. Never mind that, what about the security team, Siri? That’s a big change, right?”

Itachi shrugs. “Master Prott appears a professional wizard. Plus I already live in the spotlight; at least this time the person privy to my personal life will be bound by privacy vows and contracts.”

Timothy’s sigh is explosive and heartfelt. “That’s messed up. But you’re right, overall. Nal seems great, especially once he stopped behaving like a cardboard cutout of James Bond.” James Bond? “Never mind, forget I said that, the point is, he seems great.”

You don’t know the half of it. Hells, Itachi doesn’t know the half of it. His credentials must be out of this world if Arcturus overlooked his lack of a Noble title.

“So—roommates,” says Andrew, chaining the topic without so much as a speck of subtlety. “That’s fun? Right? No more bathroom hassle, no more awkward silences.”

Should he apologise? “Should I apologise?” Why not start there? “I know you’re your own people, but you deal with a lot of nonsense because of me.”

Andrew sends him a look so thoroughly dismissive that he barks out a short, delighted laugh.

“Alright, then. I expect our new chambers will be comfortable. I also expect Regulus and James to be regular visitors. I will eat my shoes if Kreacher doesn’t swing by with Regulus tonight.”

Timothy nods, nowhere near as calm as Itachi expected him to be. “The more I think about Potter not being here, the more upset I get. Their priorities make no sense. I get that they feel like their authority is undermined, but then they shouldn’t let things fall apart. Potter is your cousin!”

Well.

“To be fair,” he smiles. “James isn’t important because he’s my cousin. Cousin Narcissa is in school too, and she’s a Black by blood.”

Timothy waves a dismissive hand. “She’s a seventh-year and a legal adult. Plus you two have never spoken, as far as I know.”

“She’s also betrothed to the Heir of House Malfoy,” Itachi adds. “Between having the protection of two Noble Houses and making herself look entirely decorative, she’s the safest person in this castle. Not to mention that she’s likely clever as a whip and about as pleasant. I, for one, would never be able to play that game a tenth as well as she does.”

Andrew swallows a series of chuckles, producing the sound of an asthmatic hedgehog. “If ever there was a pureblood stereotype you do not fit, it’s that of a trophy spouse, Siri.”

“Imagine,” says Noah, candle-light glittering on his grin. “Imagine Siri as a bored house-husband. *Imagine*.”

“I would make a wonderful house-husband,” he says, sniffing for effect, pout over-done and chin tilted. “True, I would likely fill the house with soft, huggable animals and eat nothing but sweets and fish all day, but I’m a Black. We’re allowed out eccentricities. Look at Lady Cassiopeia Black, then think: is eating profiteroles for breakfast, lunch and dinner all that bad?”

“It’s not bad at all,” says Timothy loyally. “It’s a perfectly valid lifestyle.”

Aww. He feels his pout recede, leaving his lips in a gentler slope, endeared. “Thank you, dear.” Whoops, the endearment fell out, quite autonomously, and now he finds he doesn’t really want to take it back? It’s true; Timothy is very dear to him. All his kids are.

“Don’t let Potter hear you say that,” says Andrew, elbowing Timothy who sports a violent blush high on his cheekbones.

“James is a little territorial.” It’s true. Bold of Andrew, easily the most possessive child he’s known outside the Blacks, to cast this particular stone, but true nonetheless.

“No. James Potter?” Noah peeks out behind his hair, lower lip catching on the tip of his canine, with how wide he’s smiling. “The boy who has cursed seventeen kids over the past two days for badmouthing you? Who appears like a vengeful spirit every time you so much as look at someone except for him? That James Potter?”

“He was raised by Aunt Dorea,” Itachi says. “He’s been polite to you, hasn’t he?”

“Oh yes. Not at all intimidating. Friendly and inviting, even.”

“There you are.”

“Sooo, ” says Timothy, which has to be considered a catchphrase by now. “We count today as a win, then? Overall? A solid step up, safety-wise, you seem unexpectedly chill about having a team of bodyguards following you for the rest of the year, and Professor Woodward is firmly on your side.”

“Plus Nal seems like your type of person. Brave and stuff. Solid,” adds Noah.

“Well, he is a Hit Wizard,” says Itachi. “They’re a hardy bunch.”

Timothy tilts his head a little, a familiar glint of curiosity lighting up his eyes. “Oh yeah, I wanted to ask. What is a Hit Wizard exactly? Like a private security type thing?”

Oh, dear. He sends Andrew a somewhat despairing look. No respite from that corner.

“Not exactly.” Not even a little bit, you sweet, sweet child. “Hit Wizards are an organisation of witches and wizards who do contract work.” Kind of. Not really. “It’s complicated. Technically they operate under the jurisdiction of the ICW—International Confederation of Wizards—but teams are available for private hire if you can afford it and your request gets approved by the ICW.”

“Hold on,” says Timothy, eyes wide. “Wait, what? I read about ICW, they only get involved in super serious stuff. Wars, mass murders, terrorist attacks, that sort of thing?”

True. Let’s downplay it anyway. “Well, not only that,” he says. “They oversee a lot of international projects, fund and organise important research. But politically, yes, they are cautious about intervening too often.”

“Right, okay—Wait, no, that’s not an answer at all. Are they getting involved, then?”

Alright, get yourself together. Explain this properly before you wind your badger up into a pretzel.

“I understand Grandfather hired Master Prott entirely privately at first.” True. “He was watching over me in the hospital.” True. “When they’re off-duty, Hit Wizards are free to operate as private individuals.” Mostly true. “It just so happened Master Prott and a few members of his team were between missions, and Uncle Alphard got in touch.” Perfect.

Timothy doesn’t relent, clever eyes focused on Itachi. “And now? Are they still just overqualified bodyguards, making easy cash in their downtime?”

“Well, yes.” No, come on; don’t lie to your kids. “Yes on the easy cash part, I mean. No on the rest. But we did it properly, this time. House Black made the request, and the ICW approved it. It’s still privately funded, though, which means it’s sort of in-between.”

“Holy God,” says Timothy. “Really?”

“I did tell you,” says Andrew, not unkindly. “I told you Siri was a big deal. It’s not even about him—” He turns to Itachi, smile dimmed into a weak little approximation of the real thing. “It’s not, right? It’s about what your family would do in retaliation. What your allies would do.”

He sighs. Where is that lighthearted conversation from before? Why does it always devolve into gloom so quickly? “It would be messy. House Black can’t afford to lose. If something happens to me, they will overreact, in hopes of bluffing their way out of a terrible position.”

Timothy falls silent, visibly digesting this information, brow furrowed tightly. It’s yeah, it’s important information for them to have, but it makes Itachi’s heart squeeze. His badgers won’t have much of a childhood if they continue hanging onto him.

“As weird as that is to think about,” says Noah in a small, uncertain tone, “it’s not important, right? Okay, the fact that the magical version of the UN is keeping you safe is a bit much, but the effects are more or less the same. Nal is cool, you are safe, and the creeps sending kids death threats are getting locked up. Everybody wins, right?”

“Right,” says Itachi, echoed by Timothy who sounds like he is game to hypnotize himself if that’s what it takes.

Andrew hums. “Is that why everybody is so calm about Nal being here, in the school? Cause he’s official?”

“Possibly.” He’s not sure if the school is to be given even that much credit, but he can’t rule it out. “The Headmaster is Britain’s representative at the ICW. He definitely knows about the situation.”

“That’s a relief,” says Timothy with a whooshing exhale. “If they’re, I don’t know, agents of the Hague or whatever, that makes it better.”

“I still claim they’re here as a deterrent,” says Itachi, just in case he wasn’t painfully clear already. “I doubt anybody expects me to be kidnapped now. Grandfather just wanted to make it even more obvious that nobody shouldn’t try.”

“Right, right,” says Timothy. “Hey, let’s, let’s stop with this, yeah? Let’s just chill for a little while. We’ve got Potions tomorrow, Siri, what do you think about—”

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The staff meeting, apparently, won’t require either Itachi or Master Prott to be present. Grandfather will fill in for Itachi, and the Headmaster is already up to date on the situation. Madam Woodward therefore escorts them straight to their new rooms. Considering it’s nearing nine and Itachi’s mind feels liquified, this is a blessing.

The rooms are located near the Great Hall, behind a relief carving of a chubby niffler lounging on a pile of treasure. To get inside, you say the password, while scratching the niffler under its beak.

“The password is ‘steadfast’ for now, but you can change it as you wish, as long as you keep me informed,” says Professor Woodward. “I leave you to your explorations. Try to contain your excitement and go to bed at a reasonable time. Goodnight.”

The Professor leaves, escorted by their calls of ‘thank you’s and ‘goodnight’s, which leaves Itachi with three badgers and a slightly haggard-looking bodyguard.

“Alright, let’s see what we have to work with,” says Prott. “You kids stay here, I will sweep the place. Don’t move, I mean it. This is the basic procedure; you let me enter any space before you, to make sure it’s secure. Capishe? Good. Wait.”

From what Itachi can see, the room provides another point for the ‘sentient magic castle’ theory of architecture. There is no way Hogwarts just came equipped with rooms like these.

The carving opens into a narrow corridor which leads them into a cosy little space, similar to a lounge room, fireplace and everything. Opposite the corridor, on the other side of the circular room, is a staircase corridor that leads upward. If he is not mistaken, he and the badgers will be sleeping at the top of the staircase, and the security team will stay in the rooms between them and the living room. It’s very, very defensible, all told, while sacrificing as little comfort as possible.

“Awesome,” says Noah. “This is so much cooler than the dorms. ”

Andrew nods, already zeroed in on the comfy-looking couch, easily big enough to fit ten kids, never mind four. “Bigger too. Miles fancier. Is this a Black thing?”

Finally, a show of snobbery he is not responsible for. “I don’t think so. Trust me, when Blacks decorate and furnish a room, it’s very obvious. No, this is all Hogwarts.”

“Brilliant,” says Timothy, grinning through a yawn. Adorable.

He can sympathize; he's beat as well. "Just a little more. Garnall will let us up, soon. I can meet with Reg here, I don't have to keep you up—"

"No way am I missing your adorable little brother's visit," Timothy says, cutting him off without a beat of hesitation. "Not only because he is cute as a button, which he is, but also because you become a giant fluffy marshmallow. So, no. I'm sleepy but not that sleepy."

"Likewise," says Andrew. "Plus, Noah and I didn't get a chance to talk to him at all."

Which does open a question Itachi hadn't considered. "Should I—"

Timothy sends him a speaking look. "Should you warn your international mega-spy bodyguard that an unauthorised person will be teleporting to your not-yet-fully-secured room? Yes, Siri, I think you should."

"Apparating," he corrects. So cute. "That will be an interesting conversation, I'm sure."

"I don't know," says Andrew. "It seems to me having such a ridiculously overqualified bodyguard has its advantages. I can't see him caring about school rules, for one. If you're straight with him, I think he will enable you breaking them, as long as it makes you safer."

"That's very true," says Garnall from the corridor. "Well said, Bambi. I don't care about Hogwarts at all. Not even as a concept."

Itachi looks at him properly and takes in the tall stature, the well-balanced posture and the sharp, cold glint in his eyes. For all that the man is excellent at playing himself down, he is a contract killer. ICW or no ICW, Hit Wizards were the closest thing to ANBU Itachi could find in this world. This affable performance is just that—an amplification of one aspect of his character.

"I have no issue with being direct. May I sit?"

“’S your room, kid.”

“As you will.”

The couch is as comfortable as it appears to be, with soft leather pulled over thick, bouncy cushions, much wider and longer than normal. Garnall conjures himself a comfy-looking chair, opposite the couch.

“Alright, spill.”

“You’ve met my brother? Regulus?”

“Briefly. Cute kid, inasmuch as that apples to a sharp-eyed baby carnivore. Very Black.”

A tired smirk tugs Itachi’s lips. “And have you been briefed about our background?”

Itachi’s badgers squirm, exhaustion briefly pushed aside. Fair enough. Itachi famously doesn’t talk about himself, and they are too distracted and polite to pry.

“Not especially.” Outwardly, Prott’s expression remains an image of lazy camaraderie, but the sharp eyes are as cool as polished stones. “None of my business, really.”

“True. Well, as my dear companion has pointed out, it is in everybody’s best interest to build a functional relationship. To that end, you might benefit from some background information.”

“Please.”

Hmm. How to start this?

“Regulus is my entire life.” Always a good place to start. “You are familiar with the Traditional ways of child-rearing in these parts, yes?”

Nod.

“Well, Orion and Walburga Black are—were—as traditional as they come. At the same time, neither of them were interested in children. I raised Regulus myself, from infancy. Kreacher—our house-elf, and parent, in truth—and I raised him.”

If he looks close enough, he can see hints of honest emotion. Garnall is disquieted? Annoyed? It’s hard to say.

“I bring this up because neither of us would stand for being separated for months. Kreacher will be bringing Reg at least every other night for a visit. I cannot be moved on this point. Regulus is more important to me than every single living being in this Castle.”

It’s not hard to force himself to look over to his three kids—he’s better control over himself than that—but it’s far from pleasant. Cautious relief tingles through his body when he doesn’t spot any sign of hurt or anger. This isn’t news to them, but it is a terrible thing to say.

“Got it,” says Garnall. “Baby Black will be in your rooms more often than not. No worries, I’ll get Lockie to add him to the Wards. As far as security holes go, it’s not even on my list of concerns.”

He unclenches, not relaxing as such, but losing some of the more outward combative posture. “Thank you. I appreciate your professionalism. Other than Regulus, I suppose the only other glaring security hole that is left unaddressed is James Potter. My badgers, I assume, you’ve already included in whatever security scheme you’ve got planned?”

(“His badgers—” “Yes, Noah, I heard it too—Yes, stop it with the elbow, yes it’s funny, now is not the time—)

“It wasn’t in the contract,” says Garnall, with an empty little smile. “We were hired to keep an eleven-year-old safe, you understand? Not—this. We did not plan for a child with such a developed sense of autonomy.”

Yeah, that’s fair. “I’d apologise, but it would be a bit redundant. For what it’s worth, I do not think many, ah, *interested parties* would make the leap to use my people to get to me. As you say, I am eleven. Leverage is not something that comes into play at this age, ordinarily.”

Garnall sprawls further in his chair, twirling a lock of hair absently between his fingers. “And does it? With you?”

He doesn’t even have to think about it. “Absolutely. It is by far the easiest way of getting me to cooperate. Regulus, of course, would be a safe bet, but so would James or my badgers.”

An absent, thoughtful nod. “They’re included, then. What do you three say? Are you going to be as practical about all this as your friend is?”

“I mean,” says Timothy, “I don’t know about practical. This is all pretty abstract to me. I don’t mind Siri’s protection and I don’t mind you lookin’ out for us. Would I need to do anything?”

“Not really. Well—I don’t know. I didn’t attend Hogwarts, I don’t know how you kids spend your time. I’d ask you to not go anywhere alone within reason. Keep a lookout. Report any suspicious behaviour.”

Timothy nods a quick, slightly overwhelmed little nod. “Yeah, no, that’s fine. I don’t have any close friends other than these three. I’m, um. Pretty easy to guard? I think?”

“Same here,” says Andrew. “I don’t know enough about how this will look like to say if I’m okay with it or not, but I am all for the idea in theory.”

Noah squeaks his agreement, shoulders slightly hunched inwards, visibly uncomfortable with speaking so openly with a grown-up.

“Super,” says Garnall. “I have no problems with any of this. If you want to break school rules or whatever, just be sure to tell us beforehand. I promise none of us care even a little bit about your grades or your disciplinary records.”

“I am much more at ease now, I admit,” Itachi says. “I am glad you are not the by-the-books type. A mission like this, especially one that pertains to me, would be a nightmare otherwise.”

“Okay, that’s it.” With a lovely, flowing wand motion, Garnall starts conjuring—

“Bunnies! Siri—”

Itachi, hands full with six fluffy bunnies in different shades of pastel, doesn’t stop smooshing his nose in warm, pink fur. “Yes, Timothy. I gathered.”

“Every time you become *too* creepy, I will have to retaliate,” says Garnall. “You’re a kid, Black. If I have to spend a miserable year worrying about the very worst dregs of humanity, I will use the time to get you to act your age.”

“I am afraid you might have misunderstood a few vital points about conditioning methods. The methodology suggests a punishment-reward system that—”

Swoosh

Okay, he thinks, freezing up, heart stuttering in his chest. Okay—

“Siri,” whispers Andrew. “Siri, for the love of Merlin, never stop being a nightmare. I thought I knew what cute was and, now that I have seen pale green lambs, I realise how wrong I was.”

With slow, halting movement, Itachi lets four of the six bunnies hop out of his hands and bends his torso down enough to—

A pastel-lilac lamb snuffles him curiously, damp nose twitching. A significant portion of his mind shuts down, heart expanding into his ribcage. It’s okay. It’s fine. He’s fine. This is fine.

“Marry me,” he says in the general direction of Garnall. “I know I am an inbred, neurotic disaster, but I am sure I can negotiate a fair deal.”

“Wow, kid, that’s a whole new level of creepy—”

Swoosh

Are those—

“Hey, mister.” Noah sounds dazed, further evidenced by having forgotten any wizarding appellations. “Are those baby hippos—”

“Fuck.” Is that Itachi speaking? It sure looks like it. “Fuck, that’s cute. They’re so cute. Lady love me, I have a bunny, a lamb and a hippopotamus in my room. Am I high? Hallucinating? Finally in a padded cell in Mungo’s?”

The silence that falls on the room is enough to help him clear his head a little. Not too much though. His hands are full, still, with soft, cuddly babies in various shades of pink, blue, green, yellow and purple. It’s a lot.

“I may have gone overboard,” says Garnall. “Sorry. I’ll limit myself to one or two animals at a time. Let me just—”

Itachi’s head snaps up from where it was pressing soft kisses between a lamb’s eyes. “Take the babies from me and die screaming.”

A strangled laugh escapes one of his badgers—Noah, most likely. Sounds like his voice.

“O-kay,” says Garnall. “You know what, Im’ma call that a step in the right direction and let you play for, say, thirty minutes. Deal?”

“Deal.” It could be best if— “Maybe set a timer,” he adds, attention already back on the baby hippo gumming idly on Itachi’s little finger. “Nice big numbers, so I can keep track and, you know, prepare myself?”

“Done.”

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Chapter End Notes

Still the same Thursday, will it never end?

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Regulus

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Thursday, Sep 16th 1971)

"Okay, so that was one of the best experiences in my life."

He spent the last few minutes showering the babies with as many kisses as he could manage. The fact that they're not real makes the ride that much better. Just pure comfort without any dread caused by the messy type of questions, such as where the animals are going after, where were they before, how they got here and whether were they at all happy that the trip had taken place. Masterful, all told.

"What can I offer in return? How do you feel about copious amounts of gold?"

Timothy hiccups and shuffles closer, either to show support or to stop Itachi physically from showering the man with gold then and there. It remains unclear.

"If you think I'm going to engage in quid pro quo with my eleven-year-old client, you are not as smart as you're rumoured to be," says Garnall. "Whatever misplaced sense of gratitude you have, you should pour into being a good little client."

"Well played," says Timothy. "He will, too. You will learn our Siri is a very literal boy. Which makes it extra fun that the entire world expects him to be in politics."

“I am in politics,” corrects Itachi absently, straightening his robes. “Inasmuch as anybody is. Now, whether am I *good* at politics is another question. One that I hope to discuss with your Lady mother.” He pauses for a moment. “And Evans’ parents, for sure. Maybe Fawley’s.”

“God, whoever was responsible for you getting your hands on commie lit—”

“First of all, I wish it was Communist literature. At best it’s lukewarm Socialist theory with a token amount of labor movement writing. Second of all—”

A lovely sound interrupts his—for the most part performative—rant. Garnall’s laugh is charming, it’s just the truth. Higher in pitch than would be expected, squeaky and coming out in short, loud bursts. It’s only surprising in the very first moments and quickly becomes the only way the man could have laughed.

“Wait, kids, are you telling me the prodigious Heir of the most infamous Dark House in Europe is—a Communist?”

“I am no such thing.” Honestly. “It would be beyond presumptuous of me to claim any such thing. I am, like it or not, a wizard. Muggle political and philosophical thought is inspiring and revolutionary but it doesn’t translate well to our society.”

Garnall sobers up some, but almost all of the earlier reserved ice is gone. “So you aren’t a Communist because you—Don’t have the right to claim that identity? That’s what you’re telling me, Heir Black?”

He nods. Nicely phrased. “And because I don’t know the first thing about it,” he adds, because that’s also true. “My friends tease me, but I’ve barely even read enough to parse the terminology. Regulus has a better head for politics. I have trouble with going past the stage of pure wonder to examine it critically.”

“Right, right. Well, tell you what. You promise to continue being a wholly excellent little kid and I will continue conjuring you cute animals to cuddle on the regular, how about that?”

“Deal,” he says, because Kreacher didn’t raise no idiots. “A deeply weird deal, but that is on you.”

“Sure. Now, let’s discuss this little-brother-visit of yours?”

He focuses inwards and touches that green-yellow-brown-part of of his mind that is Kreacher-shaped. “Kreacher? If you are free, my—” Hmm. “My flatmates and I would welcome you and Reg.”

Before he finishes speaking, a soft pop and a loud shriek of ‘*Tachi*’ rings through the room. He doesn’t have time to rise from his spot on the sofa before a little black-and-silver blur scrambles up on the couch and into his lap.

“Starshine,” he says into the soft curls. “It has been an age.”

“It has,” agrees Regulus.”A whole day, even. A scandal, if you ask me.”

“Outright immoral. Definitely illegal. If not, legislation will be introduced as soon as I can deliver a suitable bribe to Aunt Cassie.”

“Good plan, good plan. Where—Kreacher, come on, you’re missing precious ‘Tachi time. We can’t introduce legislation that fast, you know? It’s going to take at least a couple of weeks to make it illegal to go without ‘Tachi-cuddles for longer than forty-five minutes.”

“I lament,” says Kreacher, voice grave, as he climbs up and into the hug with infinite dignity. “The failures of the Government are many.”

“How long do you have,” says Itachi under his breath after a long series of heartbeats.

“Longer than last time but not very long,” says Regulus. “Grandfather didn’t set us a concrete limit, but I’d rather not strain his patience. He has been frightfully busy.”

“I’ll take what I can get. Today has been one of the longest days of my life. It feels like at least three weeks have gone by since I saw you last night.”

Reg’s arms squeeze around him. “I get that. Now, before I lose all motivation to do anything but snuggle and talk nonsense, we have important work to do.”

“We always do. Alright, dearest. Let’s get the boring part over with.”

“Thank you.” Regulus squeezes his face into the space where Itachi’s neck meets his head briefly, before untangling himself. “Introduce us, please.”

Itachi brushes his lips over Kreacher’s head last time, much less eager to relinquish the uncomplicated warmth of his family.

“Of course.”

His badgers, somewhat predictably, all have hearts in their eyes. Very appropriate. Regulus is the sweetest thing that ever breathed. Garnall does too, which is more surprising. It’s obscured quickly behind an easy-going mask, but if Itachi saw it, Regulus definitely did.

Poor Garnall. His little brother will eat him alive if he doesn’t stop being taken in by large eyes and soft curls.

“You already met my badgers,” he says, sweeping his hand to include all three kids watching them in mute delight. “Even though time constraints prevented you from speaking with Noah or Andrew. Now meet Master Garnall Prott, head of the team tasked with guarding my life and liberty. Garnall, meet Regulus Black, the single greatest thing humanity has ever, or will ever produce.”

“Merry meet,” says Regulus, the dryness of his voice devastating in combination with the round cheeks and sparkling eyes. “My brother’s dramatics aside, it’s a pleasure to see you again, Master Warnock, Master Young, Master Clarke. Master Prott, I don’t envy your task, as much as I am grateful for your presence.”

His badgers fall over one another to assure Reg he should really call them by their first names, please and thank you. In contrast, a flash of a darker emotion—sadness?—passes over Garnall’s features.

“How do you feel about bunnies, kid,” he says, twirling his wand in his hands.

“Bunnies?” Regulus sends Itachi a puzzled look. “I like them? As a species? Theoretically? I can’t say I’ve studied them in-depth.”

“Good to know, good to know. Never mind, you mentioned something about important work?”

Regulus blinks but allows the seemingly random rejoinder. A relief, that. Itachi’s heart would buckle under the strain of Garnall’s conjurations and his baby brother in the same room at the same time.

“Yes, the work. A moment, please.” With a last smile sent Itachi’s way, Reg submerges his hand to the shoulder into the messenger bag slung around his shoulder. “First thing’s first. The warding contracts for your badgers, ‘Tachi.”

The what now? It’s beyond gratifying to not have to vocalize his thoughts; Reg is a master at silent communication.

“Your badgers’ homes are unsecured,” Regulus says, sending a stern look his way. “Well, I don’t know about Master Clarke—pardon, Andrew’s—home, but I assume, ah, T-Timothy’s and Noah’s lack any reasonable amount of protection?”

With a delighted hum, Itachi takes the three thick scrolls of parchment from Regulus. In-house Warding Masters, as expected; a well-off branch of the Bolitho Family, long-standing Vassal House of the Blacks.

“Very clever,” he says. “Thank you, Reg.”

Reg sniffs a little for effect. “Your badgers are yours, which makes them mine, which makes them deserving of everything good. I didn’t have much time, but Aunt Dorea sent me a list of her contacts. I spoke to Olaya and her wife Soo-young over the floo this morning, and they were understanding about the urgency of our situation.”

Timothy shuffles closer, body language dripping with confusion. “Umm—Siri—”

“Can I have a quick look-see,” cuts in Garnall.

Reg sends him another uncertain look. “I have copies for you, of course. House Bolitho will contact you directly, to coordinate.”

Itachi leaves the two to figure each other out. It’s clear Garnall is struggling with the hurricane of competence that is Regulus on a mission. Regulus, in contrast, isn’t used to adults who aren’t immediate blood relatives. This will be a learning experience for both of them.

“Yes, Timothy,” he says, instead. “I assume you have questions?”

“Ques—Yes Siri, I have questions. What is this about warding our homes? Our Muggle homes?”

His other two badgers shuffle closer too, eyes wide and disbelieving.

Alright, focus what little brainpower you have left. “I understand this seems intrusive.” He tries to inject a note of apology into his voice he in no way feels. “It is really not. Not all magicals are as clueless about Muggle culture as the Ancient and Noble Houses are. It would be beyond reckless to trust the safety of your families on Pureblood ignorance.”

Timothy chews his cheek, visibly trying to wrap his mind around this concept. Noah is no better, but Andrew is—cagey. Not angry, but uncomfortable. Something a lot like apprehension is written in the tense line of his shoulders. What is this, then? Best address it in private.

“You have to speak to my family about all of that,” Timothy says after a long pause. “I’m the baby of the family. I can’t make those sorts of decisions.”

“Absolutely fair. I am overdue a conversation with your House—pardon, family.”

He shifts to look at the other two boys. “How about you two? How do you feel about this?” Please, Izanami, *please* don’t dig your heels in. This is such a basic precaution; if his badgers rebel this early—

“My parents are, um, very Muggle,” says Noah eyes wide and doubtful. “Very catholic. Irish, you know? They are. Hm. They won’t understand? But will indulge me? Yeah. I don’t know if they will take you seriously at all, though. They’re, like, stereotypical adults.”

Hmm. “I respect that,” he says, measuring each word. “I understand your parents might not be comfortable with taking the word of a child at face value. However.” How to put this? “I don’t know—”

“Most of our family are hard-line Pureblood supremacists,” says Regulus bluntly. “Even the less extreme ones have never spoken to a Muggle in their lives. Letting them negotiate anything would be a disaster.”

Timothy breathes in a sharp, deliberate breath. Where he and Noah look to be at sea, Andrew hasn’t lost the slightly hunted, furtive air hanging around him. “Well, that’s—a problem.”

“I could do it,” says Garnall. “I look damn well in a suit and I spend a lot of my time in the Muggle world. Do you think that will be enough?”

Timothy shrugs, eyes jumping between Itachi, Regulus and Garnall. “Maybe. I don’t know. No offence to you, of course, but I think my mum would expect to hear from the family that offered.”

“That’s true,” Itachi says. “Reg, who could we—”

“Uncle Alphard?”

They pause, trying to imagine Uncle Alphard who looks precisely like the pirate he is, negotiating with middle-class Muggles.

“No, definitely not. Aunt Dorea?”

“Too busy. Lord Potter?”

“Possible, but, again, different family. Also, a Potter and thus an unpredictable embodiment of chaos. Cousin Andromeda?”

“Would be perfect, but we didn’t have the time to reverse her disowning. Hmm, there is always—”

A blush finds its way on Itachi’s cheeks. That would be appropriate, if you squint hard and don’t think about it. On the plus side, there is no disregarding the man’s thick air of authority.

“Uncle Alphard will never let me live it down,” he says, voice glum as is appropriate. “Would he even do it?”

“Favour for a favour. You can leverage your Patronus if it comes down to it.”

“Is there anyone—”

“Aunt Cassie—”

“Alright, alright, no need to get snippy.”

Well, okay.

“So,” he says, turning back to his audience, who is very comically split between amusement in Garnall’s corner, and bewilderment cut with dread in his badgers’. “There might be a technical member of House Black who would be a tactful representative. Daigo Kioshi-sama, my Great-Uncle’s husband in all but name. Not someone we’re close to as such, but we should have enough leverage to get him to play along.”

When that fails to produce any thoughts for or against, Regulus jumps in. “Lord Daigo is a respected member of the Japanese nobility, and as such has the authority to represent us. The Japanese aren’t as segregated as we are, or at least not segregated in the same way, so they are more comfortable with interacting with non-magicals.”

Timothy looks between them and Noah for a moment, mouth poised as if to say something, then thinking better of it. “I mean,” he says, trying so hard to phrase something in a delicate way that it comes across as comical. “First of all, thank you for the consideration but, um. I don’t know if—The Muggle world is not without its prejudices, and, um. What I mean is—”

Garnall thankfully comes to the rescue. “What the kid is trying to say, is that same-sex couples aren’t as accepted in Muggle culture as they are here. A decent analogy would be the prejudice against vampires or werewolves. Moreover, I happen to be tangentially aware of who Daigo-sama is, and I would not recommend the first point of contact between your families to be a man related to the Japanese Emperor.”

“Distantly related,” says Regulus, charmingly petulant in a way that would make Itachi coo if he didn’t have to re-assure two of his badgers who are cringing in ill-places shame.

“Do you think I would hold it against you,” he says, keeping his voice light and unconcerned. “We are having this conversation because the majority of our family are incapable of conversing with a non-magical at all, never mind civilly.”

With that said, he is a bit surprised. He’s read Lady Warnock’s writing; he would not have thought her to hold such strange prejudices.

Noah droops further. “Tim is too polite to say his parents are fine about, y’know, that stuff. But my parents are Catholic. They’re not like, violent about it, but yeah. They think it’s a sin and all that.”

Hmm. “How about this,” he says. “Madam Woodward already said she would get in touch with your families. If your parents ask for a representative of House Black, Daigo-sama is our only viable option. If they are mollified by mine and Madam Woodward’s words, Master Prott—pardon, Garnall—can explain.”

“That’s fair,” says Noah, with a relieved, guilty smile. “I’m sorry, but you know how it is.”

“Oh we know,” says Regulus. “We are very familiar with how complicated family can be.”

“You’ve been awfully quiet, ‘Drew,” says Timothy, which makes both Itachi and Andrew cringe a little. Timothy *appears* to be oblivious about it, but Itachi has his doubts. His sweetest badger is also the most empathetic one. “Everything cool?”

“I—” says Andrew, in a precise tone that sets off alarm bells in Itachi’s mind. “I would rather if all communication was directed to my sister. Who is, as it happens, my legal guardian.”

“Of course,” says Itachi lightly, getting ahead of an uncomfortable silence that threatens to settle. “If you want, I will give you my opening letter, and you can send it to whomever you wish. I can’t speak for Madam Woodward, of course. Would the Lady in question be uncomfortable with Daigo-sama?”

Andrew sends him a deeply grateful look. “No, not at all. She lives in the magical world, she knows how things are here.”

“I’ll contact Uncle Alphard, then,” says Regulus. “The only downside to this, if I understand everything correctly, is that the introductions can’t be made before the Yule holidays. I’d have preferred the warding to be done sooner.”

That’s true. But Itachi can’t see a way around it—

“They probably won’t need the wards so urgently,” says Garnall. “So far nothing we picked up includes any interest in your friends. The type of people after you can’t imagine a Black forming attachments to anyone other than the very best-bred Pureblood.”

“That’s—good?” Timothy’s tentative tone is light with a note of humour. Forced humour, most likely, but good enough for now. “I don’t know about you guys, but I can use some time to relax. The past few days have been—a lot.”

They certainly have, and for the life of him, Itachi can’t see how they will grow any less hectic.

“We will revisit the topic later, then,” he says. “With your permission, I will be writing a letter to your guardians over the weekend. It is beyond inappropriate that I haven’t done so already, with how entangled you three have become in my nonsense.”

“Oh, hold on, I’m not done.” Regulus rummages around his bag for a few moments, before emerging with a lovely steel box, set with a mother-of-pearl inlay depicting sea waves. “Some trinkets for you.”

Somewhat predictably, he hands the box to Garnall. “The list of items and enchantments is on top.”

Garnall whistles low once he opens the box, and takes out a piece of parchment. “Nice. I had expected something like this, but not as quickly.”

“It’s not all of it of course,” Regulus says. “Grandfather should take you through the main vault once we have some time to breathe. These are just some pieces Aunt Cassie and Aunt Dorea sent me as a stop-gap measure.”

Oh, okay, that’s what that is. Itachi’s brother is the best.

“What is it,” whispers Timothy, curiosity cut with dread colouring his voice oddly.

“I imagine they’re protective enchantments for us. Jewellery and the like. I never wore much of it before, but it was only a matter of time. Most everybody wears at least a few pieces.”

“Jewellery, Siri,” says Anthony, trying for dry but ending up closer to amused despair. “You are giving us jewellery?”

Regulus stiffens ever so slightly, which yeah.

“I would phrase it differently,” he says, keeping his tone light. “No offence meant, of course.”

“Oh, I think I know where this is heading.” Thank the Lady, but Timothy’s tone is almost completely back to its normal, teasing cadence. “Do you not want to propose to all three of us, Siri? I am shocked. Shocked and appalled. Were you leading us on, this entire time? Is this relationship not going to net me a spot in your harem, because, boy, will I have a thing or two to say about false advertising.”

Yikes. The thing is, while Itachi knows Timothy is messing about, Regulus doesn't. The note of alarm in his brother's eyes grows and grows until they are wide as saucers and he is moments away from wringing his hands.

"He's joking," he tells him as calmly as he can. "No need to fret. Muggle culture is not as strict about these matters. People don't get into serious arrangements until much later in their lives."

Regulus exhales a long, shuddering breath. "Right, yes, I know that." He puts on a wobbly smile. "I read about that. Very progressive, I thought."

Timothy's expression falls into one of contrition. "Oh, I'm sorry—I didn't mean to be insensitive. I'm sorry Regulus, I promise I'm not making light of your way of doing things. I was just—it was just a joke."

"Merlin, you kids are hilarious," says Garnall in a wondering tone. "A full-on comedy show. Now, considering it's nearing midnight and little boys need their beauty sleep, why don't you all head off to bed, while I go through this list?"

"Midnight," Regulus shrieks.

Wait—Kreacher? What has his parent been doing all this time?

Itachi turns around a little urgently, making his way to the corner, flooding with guilt. Kreacher is more than just his parental figure, he is his friend, his confidante and a person he respects greatly. He let himself be swept away by his badgers and his brother—

"I'm sorry," he says, once he reaches the corner where Kreacher sits with a heavy air of peace blanketing him. Thick papers are arranged neatly in front of him, and an array of bottles and brushes is within his reach. He's been—drawing? No, it's calligraphy, it seems like, in a style and language Itachi is entirely unfamiliar with. They're beautiful—

Focus!

“We left you out completely. That was beyond rude of me—”

“Not so.” With precise, achingly slow movements, Kreacher finishes the stroke of a brush with a long, soft-looking tip. “Conversing brings me no pleasure. I am doing precisely what I enjoy most: existing in the same space as my two stars, trying to capture a fleeting moment of their light.”

Well, then. A lump builds in Itachi’s throat, except it’s a warm, soft lump, comforting instead of constricting. What a bizarre sensation.

“You’re so kind,” he says once his voice cooperates. “I am beyond lucky to have you in my life.”

“Reverse is, of course, true. I understand it is time to leave?”

“Unfortunately. I dare not try Grandfather too much tonight.”

“Wise.” Kreacher stands to leave, a click of his fingers and a flex of his magic banishing his art pieces within moments.

Hold on—

James.

“Will you be able to return? I hate to ask this of you, but I owe Dorea’s Heir, James, a full account of what had gone down tonight. Ideally, I’d have found a way to invite him in person, but that will have to wait until tomorrow.”

“I had wondered why the Potter child was absent. Of course Kreacher—Of course *I* will carry your letter. Have it ready in an hour. Merry part, starshine.”

Garnall shows his badgers to their rooms, while Itachi remains in the main chamber to write down the happenings as best he can. It’s a mess of a letter, perfectly matching the messy flow of his thoughts. If he had any strength left, he’d rewrite the thing so it reads less as the stream of consciousness of a boy halfway to sleep. Alas. It ends up being a decent-length report, about two sheets of parchment, and he seals it with his ring to make sure nobody else but James will read it. Heir rings aren’t good for much, but the—rather basic—enchantments built into them are convenient for times like these.

Their sleeping chamber is located at the end of a relatively short staircase. Unlike the previous room, they don’t have separate chambers. Instead, a wide, circular room sits a the top of the stairs, with four four-poster beds quartering the space evenly. Each bed is bracketed by a desk and a wardrobe, and a thick dark red carpet gives the room an elegant, comfortable feel.

His badgers are already fast asleep, having more or less stumbled straight into bed. Itachi is more than willing to follow their lead in this. Izanami wept, but it’s been a long day.

Chapter End Notes

Five chapters for one day, can you fucking believe it. I’ve been writing this Thursday for like, a month,. Two months? Goddamn.

Is it five? Is it more?

Who knows. I don't. I don't know that the entire story isn't just this damn friday.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

James&Frank

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Friday, Sep 17th 1971)

Itachi doesn't even have the time to overthink this new left turn his life has taken, that's how taxing Friday is. Breakfast alone is a study of how thick tension can get in a school full of teenagers

James Potter is responsible for at least ten per cent of the tension. He and Frank sit next to one another, empty seats left on both sides. Both boys are giving off every sign of displeasure with anger thrown in for spice. Frank's Head Boy badge is notably absent. Wonderful.

Garnall's presence is almost more than the hormone-addled minds of the student body can handle. The man wove the impersonal guard persona around himself so tightly this morning, Timothy burst into applause, having watched the transformation in real time. Now the man stands behind Itachi's chair with all the personality of a half-heartedly animated suit of armour.

As for Hufflepuff House, they sit in subdued silence. First-year badgers droop, posture screaming down-trodden angst. Itachi doesn't doubt Madam Woodward chewed them out for their little segregation campaign. So far it seems her words were strong enough to shame but not enough to correct the behaviour in question.

(Moss, notably, ignores the atmosphere with so little effort that a small part of Itachi starts doubting his species. Is that boy a student, or a particularly avant-garde poltergeist who poses as a seventh-year Prefect to help out around the school?)

“I will be missing Transfiguration,” he tells his badgers, not bothering to keep his voice down. “Madam Woodward scheduled an appointment with Healer Febru at half past nine.”

“Oh, no, not Transfiguration,” says Andrew, eyebrows arched high, tone about as expressive as stone “However will you cope? Your most favourite subject of all.”

“Yes, yes very droll. I have three health-related appointments today, I’ll have you know, plus I need to talk James down from whatever ledge he has climbed on. I require, I demand, I *deserve* so much sympathy, children.”

“I sympathise, Siri,” says Timothy, blinking at him without a hint of guile.

I know you do, you adorable little lamb. “Obviously, this cements you as my favourite. Just in case anyone asks, yes I do have a favourite, and it’s Timothy, the sweetest child in this entire school.”

“Ouch,” says Noah, the soft smile customarily curtained away. “Keep your tone down, Siri. You can’t say you need to calm down Potter, and then in the next breath proclaim another boy your favourite. That’s just reckless behaviour.”

True.

“Very wise,” he agrees. “I accept your advice. Well, I must be off. I have a pair of Gryffindors to accost and it’s nearing half eight. Merry part, badgers. Stay safe, and keep your trinkets close to heart.”

They had better keep them close. It was a battle and a half to get them to accept the enchanted jewellery and in the end, Itachi had to agree to take the damn things back once the danger had passed.

He doesn't warn Garnall—one, it would cut against the 'hired muscle' role he's playing, two, the man knows Itachi's itinerary back to front and, three, is blessed with a working set of ears—and instead moves leisurely to the Gryffindor table.

It says a lot about James' state of mind that he doesn't notice the hush that falls as Itachi and his dragon-knight move through the Great Hall. Worryingly, both Frank and James are still staring at their food by the time Itachi is within five feet of them.

Hmm. How to play this.

"Merry meet, darling," he settles for saying, pitching his voice so it carries slightly. "Merry meet, Frank."

"Siri—" James twists around in his seat so violently, that his chair screeches on the stone tiles. The sound causes more than one eavesdropping child to jump or jerk in surprise and Frank to jerk and curse under his breath. Hmm. Is Frank—angry? At Itachi? Huh.

"Are you by any chance finished with breakfast?" Keeping his voice polite is not as easy as he'd like. James slept very little; his eyes are swollen and his lips are bitten raw, hair in even worse disarray than usual. Does he—Itachi knows the Potter Heir is popular, but does *James* have close friends in Gryffindor? Someone he feels safe with?

"Am I—Don't be ridiculous Siri—" James trails off, trying to untangle himself out of his chair and away from the table without toppling it and himself.

"Do you want to join me, then?" Itachi pauses, letting some of the anger twist his lips and deepen his voice. "Now that you are not bound by, ah, duties whose importance can't be underestimated. Or was it mindless, faux-educational labour designed to humiliate and intimidate? It was one or the other, I can't quite recall."

Some of the tired sadness lifts from James' eyes, and the curve of his lips gains a much more honest dimension. "I missed you. Let me just get out of this damn chair and—Thank the Lady—Let's get—No, wait—Frank, join us? Please?"

Itachi, whose eyebrows lift more, the more unhinged James' monologue becomes, looks between the Longbottom Heir sporting an impressively unreadable expression and James who is teetering on the intersection of guilty, defiant and desperate.

"Frank is always a welcome addition to any group I am a part of. Frank, do you want to take a walk with James and me? Perhaps see our new rooms? In contrast to the *regular system*—" He lets his lips twist and his voice soak the words with as much mockery as he is able. "—These rooms are open to any we would invite, irrespective of the colour of their tie. As invaluable as that metric may be."

"You're in excellent form today, dear," says James. "Is this how you respond to stress? Say it isn't so! I can't pine for this side of you in good conscience, if so."

"I'm not going to be very good company today, Sirius," says Frank. His eyes, like James' are bloodshot, but unlike James, a suggestion of a hangover hangs around his shoulders. More tellingly, a Heirship ring glitters on his finger, which he had previously kept hidden as a sign of respect for the un-Traditional portion of students in his care.

"You will always be good company," he says, a little firmer than the airy tone he was going for. "Join us." He hesitates for less than a beat. "Please?"

"Shit, kid," says Frank, rubbing a hand over his eyes. "Sure. I know when I'm beaten. Lead the way. Just don't expect me to be a fountain of cheer."

"Splendid. Onwards, then. I have an appointment in an hour, and you have classes to get to. There's no time to waste."

"Alright, out with it," Itachi says, once they're in their rooms, which are thankfully only about a minute away from the Great Hall. "Why do you two look like you haven't slept at all, where's your Head Boy badge and who do I need to murder gruesomely?"

“Really,” says James, voice high and incredulous. “Is that the important part here? Not your new Head of security? ”

“Right. Let’s make this quick. Frank, James, meet Master Garnall Prott, the man tasked with keeping me alive and reasonably free. Garnall, meet my dear companion Frank, Heir to Ancient and Noble House Longbottom. You’ve already met my cousin James, Heir to Noble House Potter.” He pauses, debating if this will be pushing this too far. “Garnall, I can’t, of course, tell you what to do, but I would consider it a personal favour if you drop the professional act around these two.”

Garnall hesitates, Itachi can read the uncertainty in the tightly clenched muscles before he relents. “Sure, kid,” he says, throwing himself into a chair he conjured mid-fall. “Two more Lords that will remember my shameful lack of professionalism. Destroy my reputation, why don’t you? Grind it into dust with my dignity and self-respect.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure your career as a Hit Wizard will be greatly damaged by this. I can already picture all those functions you will be looked at askance.”

James’ grin grows by the moment, and even Franks’s thick coat of gloom lifts slightly. “Wow, Siri, your note didn’t do him justice. Hi, hello, hi, I’m James, and I want to be you when I grow up.”

“Cheers, kid,” says Garnall. “Call me Nal, for pity’s sake. Both of you. Now, don’t mind me; I’m but an invisible shadow on the wall.”

“Wow,” mutters James, all sorts of impressed. “Amazing. Tell me—”

“I hate to interrupt,” says Itachi, not at all hating to interrupt, “but our time is limited and the challenges ahead are many. You will have many opportunities to harass my Head of security. Can you explain the very alarming state I’ve found you in?”

“You know, baby Potter is right,” says Frank. “I don’t know what has gotten into you, Sirius, but you should try and keep it there. This new communicative you is a marvel.” The tall boy conjures a chair of his own—a less impressive but perfectly serviceable chair, more cushion than wood—and sinks into it with the air of a man sixty years his senior. Concerning.

“Noted. Now if you could stop dodging my questions—”

“McGonagall happened,” says James, losing a considerable amount of his cheer, anger flowing in its place. “She—I don’t know what happened, why she—” He starts rocking back and forth on his heels, stress so painfully obvious that Itachi loses the fight with himself and tugs both of them to sit on the sofa. James immediately eels into Itachi’s space, hooks his jaw over his shoulder and grows quiet and sullen.

“She got real curt with James,” says Frank, when it becomes clear he is not going to continue. “I stepped in. Then she got curt with me. I—didn’t handle it well.”

“She forbid Frank to see you last night,” mutters James. “Among other things.”

“She said some things, I said some things. I said some more things. In retrospect, I should not have said that second batch of things, especially not in front of the kiddies. Long story short, I’m no longer Head Boy or a Prefect and I might be in detention for the rest of the semester.”

“It was really awesome. Scary, but awesome.” James’ tone is worryingly sad, not matching his words at all. “I—It was my fault, I know, but still, it was—”

Frank’s eyes flash, and he leans forward in his seat, looking so adult for a moment, that it is clear the boy will be a phenomenal Lord one day soon. “It was not your fault. Everything is crazy and stressful, yes, and the staff bears the brunt of it, but if they can’t keep it together for the First Years, then they should not hold the positions they do.”

This, unsurprisingly, doesn’t do much to diminish the tangible air of guilt around James. Itachi can almost smell it coming off of the boy in waves.

“You know he’s right.” He wiggles around, shifting enough to be able to look James in the eye. “You know he is. I don’t know what was said, obviously, and I know you can be—a lot when you want to be. That doesn’t mean she should have done whatever it is she did that made her pick for Headboy feel the need to step in.”

“The whole school has grown so *mean*,” says James in a small voice. “I don’t know, yeah? I’m just a first year. But even Aunt Dorea never said it would be like this. That the teachers would be so, so—Even McGonagall. She’s been so nice in the beginning, so brave and strong and now—”

“I’m a seventh year and I can tell you, Hogwarts has never been this strange,” says Frank, and something behind his eyes changes, like a dam breaking. “We’re not even a month into the semester, and I barely recognise the school. I’m not even talking about the students—the staff have never been this hands-off.”

He surges from his chair and starts pacing like a caged animal. Gold sparks from the tips of his hair and Itachi is pretty sure there will be crescent-shaped wounds cut into his palms.

“They treat you like you’re a mix of a visiting lecturer and a circus attraction. Slughorn visibly flinches away from you whenever he sees you. MacCavity’s lessons grow more and more rabidly anti-dark to the point it’s unclear if it’s dark magic or Dark Houses he is teaching us to guard against—”

MacCavity? The DADA Professor? He’s anti-Dark? Never mind that. Focus.

“—Kettleburn doesn’t give a fuck and Flitwick had adopted this bizarre ‘let them learn from their mistakes’ strategy that I can’t even fully internalize, much less accept. Now even McGonagall has gone ‘round the twist—what else are the students going to do, but follow their lead, especially with the Prophet running wild.”

Wow, okay. There’s a lot to unpack. James looks like he agrees, but is either too tired or, honestly, too intimidated to get into it. Garnall, however, is watching Frank with a clinical, detached air of a man gathering intel.

Izanami, but he is badly equipped for this conversation. De-escalation? Itachi? Where can he lodge his complaint?

"You are taking this personally, which I appreciate, truly," he says, picking his words carefully. "I am honoured. But, remember that I am a polarising figure. Most of the professors can't look past my reputation and social status, which is disappointing, but human."

Frank honest to Sage growls, the very image of helpless, undirected anger, before he calms himself and falls into his chair with a huff.

"I know, I know. I don't even—I've known you for a while, Sirius. I know how disgustingly strong and self-possessed you are. This isn't even all about you. You don't give a fuck about the teachers, this school or anything that's not your people. But *I* do. I care about Hogwarts and the kids and this is destroying it." He leans forward, nostrils flaring with anger. "This is not how a school should look like. Do you think kids are learning anything? No—it's all gossip and drama, and the teachers are not only letting it happen, they are doing it themselves."

Okay, so that's true. The teachers have stopped even assigning homework in the past week. Other than making sure children attend lectures, all of the focus has been on Black Family Drama.

"I admit I hadn't considered that," he says, trying for earnest, but ending up closer to detached. "I see how that would be—upsetting." Honestly, as problems go, repeating a semester or two is not even in the footnotes.

Frank spots Itachi's less-than-horrified reaction and runs an anxious hand through his hair. "I know, I know you have much bigger things to worry about. But I can't help but be furious—this is a school. It's supposed to be *the* school. So few kids get the chance to attend Hogwarts, a lot of families spend gold they can't afford, and this is what they get for it?"

What can he say? That's life. Frank's concern is admirable. His worries are not unfounded, just a bit—naive. The air of civil unrest has been thick for a while now. With Riddle, Dumbledore and the Ministry at each other's throats, and the country both deep in the throes

of post-war depression and burdened with a bigoted system of governance—Well. Itachi is aware of it, and he hardly left his house before coming to this wretched place.

His silence is telling. Frank loses more and more of his righteous anger and is left with, what is by all accounts, a killer hangover and a sense of impending doom.

“So this is not what I expected this conversation to look like,” says James into the silence. “I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t this. Frank, I gotta say, Siri is not the only one holding out on me. I’m loving this growly, bitey side of you.”

“Oh shush,” mutters Frank. “We’re all nuts, I know. My mother will—Merlin, I don’t even know what she will do, but it will not be pretty. She adores Regulus and, by proxy, Sirius. When I tell her about this latest fuckup, she will not react well.”

And so the school drama spills even further out into the real world, and the chaos grows. Amaterasu, but he needs a Calming Draught.

“On that cheerful note, I am afraid we must leave.” He runs his hand through James’ locks one last time, before untangling himself from his octopus limbs as gently as he can. “I have a meeting with Healer Febru and Madam Woodward. Come along, dear. I know you aren’t McGonagall’s biggest fan but she can and will give you detention. Come, come. Off we trot.”

Healer Febru subjects him to a truly comical amount of tests. Spells, potions, readings, and even a few rituals are thrown in to make it that extra bit exhausting. He does what he’s told, forces down the potions, answers all the questions and still the exam takes up the better part of two hours. His stomach is well on its way to digesting itself by the time the short stop at the owlery is finished, and he meets up with his badgers.

“How was it,” asks Timothy, vibrating with pent-up energy. The four of them, plus Garnall, are in the kitchens—Frank and James were nowhere to be found, in the few minutes Itachi could stand being in the Great Hall—and Itachi can finally enjoy a meal not hamstrung by Healer’s orders. “Your exam?”

“As I suspected, my magical exhaustion is gone in every meaningful way.” Hopefully, they have enough tact to not ask about the rest. Because the rest—isn’t good. It took a lot of Healers a lot of time and gold to engineer Itachi’s—Sirius’—body to survive his first years. Cruciatus wreaked havoc on their efforts, to the point where his heart is kept together by magic alone. Itachi’s magic, which is excellent in that he doesn’t have to rely on external workings to keep him alive, but less excellent if he edges closer to magical exhaustion than is wise.

“Fantastic,” beams Timothy. “That’s so great, Siri! You can finally cast magic and have some fun!”

Itachi has been casting magic for years, sweetpea. There is beauty in it, yes, but nowhere near as much as you’d think.

“It will certainly make it simpler. I am still not cleared by my primary Healers, so it’s best not to get ahead of myself.”

“Are you missing Potions too,” asks Noah.

“Probably. We’ll see. My appointment is at one.” It isn’t lost on anyone that the appointments were made by Professor Woodward and they curiously overlap with almost every class they have that day. “I should join you for DADA at least.”

“That should be interesting,” says Garnall. Itachi’s Shinobi-ears perk up. His guard has not expressed any interest in Itachi’s classes so far.

“Why so?”

Garnall sends him a slow, evaluating look. “Seamus MacCavity is not as apolitical as I would like. The Longbottom boy confirmed it, but I had my worries. He was an Auror in the Grindelwald wars. Very Light, very set in his ways.”

Huh. “I hadn’t noticed any bigotry at all. Although I admit, I forget his name, his face and his very existence as soon as I leave the classroom.”

“He doesn’t glare at you or anything,” says Timothy. “Or cringe like Sluggy. We haven’t covered that much, honestly. He does talk about dark magic, but the class is called Defence against the Dark Arts, so.”

Garnall’s lips twist into a half-sneer. “Listen, I fight for a living. Being good at magic is literally why I am alive. Plus, I don’t live in Britain and have no abraxan in this race. So, you can trust me when I tell you that anyone claiming that Dark magic is evil, Light magic is good, or that one is weaker than the other is trying to recruit you.”

Timothy looks at him, a little confused at the unexpected tangent. “Good to know? Is that likely to happen? You realise we haven’t even been taught the levitation charm yet, right?”

Garnall looks at Timothy, Andrew and Noah, really looks at them and his expression shifts from displeasure to sheepish humour. “Right—sorry. Little Black is so eerily mature that I keep forgetting how young you kids are. Never mind all that. Maybe just keep in mind that some of your teachers will have biases and you don’t need to take on everything they say.”

Andrew huffs, slouching in his chair. “Most of our teachers are much too busy with goggling at Siri like he’s a tamed bear on a leash. They don’t have the time to brainwash us.”

“That’s not fair,” Itachi says, funnelling his voice into a mild, easy flow. “Madam Woodward is wonderful. So is Professor McGonagall, recent gaffes aside. Professor Flitwick is very fair, and Headmaster Dumbledore has made every allowance he could to make my stay here safe. Do you know when was the last time a team of Aurors or Hit Wizards were allowed to stay at Hogwarts? Never, that’s when.”

“Nooo, Siri,” whines Timothy. “Don’t be reasonable about this. We’re allowed to be brats. You, especially.”

You couldn't be a brat to save your life, he thinks, fond. And nobody can afford me to be one.

"On that note, Healer Febru has signed off on desserts, and I have a few weeks of mashed carrots and soft-boiled rice to make up for. Now—let's see what I can bribe our elvish friends with?"

The private team of St Mungo's healers only confirms Healer Febru's findings: Itachi's body is a ruinous, desolate nightmare, but magic-wise, he's golden. The potion regimen doesn't diminish, but it does change to focus more on improving his organs by the system, rather than putting out more atomised fires.

On the flip side, he has about four hours of Potions left, and not a single excuse under the sun not to attend. He's better equipped to attend class today than he has been since the start of term. Joy. He could skip. What can they do to him? Take points? Hah. Then again, Madam Woodward would likely be *disappointed*. Ugh.

The only upside he can see is that the healing team Grandfather hired is nauseatingly servile. It wasn't difficult to wheedle a sensible stash of calming draughts, diluted to his prescription. He downs one, much like he'd have done with rice wine once, and heads off to class like a good little pupil.

"My apologies for being late, Professor—" He ignores the crash of the vial slipping from Slughorn's fingers and shattering on the ground. At this point, he's pretty sure that Slughorn is performing this for kicks, no matter how eerie Riddle was as a child. "May I join the class?"

"Yes, yes of course," calls Slughorn from the storage room where he scuttled off, ostensibly to replace whatever ingredient he destroyed. "Please, take a seat. We're preparing a simple sunburn balm today. I very much doubt you will have any issue with it aha-ha."

Bless the wonders of psychoactive potions. It's not even difficult to remain perfectly calm in the face of such idiocy. He scans the room for his badgers—

We—ell. Look at that. Noah sits with Andrew, as is appropriate. Timothy, on the other hand, sits with Shafiq. He doubts it was Timothy's idea. He's got a good head on his shoulders, which means he is terrified of Shafiq, both because of her unnervingly symmetrical face and her resemblance to a vaguely peckish anaconda.

Snape sits alone in the front row.

He nods absently to Garnall, who nods back deeply but doesn't follow him inside. They haven't discussed what they will do for classes, but he very much approves of this solution. The man sweeps his wand in a wide arch and follows it up with a dozen silent spells cast at the ceiling, before standing by the door in an alert but relaxed fashion.

"Master Snape," he greets, bowing his head a little. "Might I partner with you for the class? I am reasonably familiar with the material and will likely not hinder you much."

"Sure," says Snape in a tone as close to cheerful as the boy gets, not bothering to look up from his work. Here, in the Potions lab, the boy is without equal and he knows it. The work genuinely fills him with joy, which casts him in a rather lovely light. He also, apparently, isn't at all put-off or interested in the intrigue surrounding Itachi.

Good to know.

"Thank you. Since we are new to each other's methods, I will bow to your expertise and follow your instructions."

"Good—Dice the bramble bats. And for the love of Merlin, don't chop—"

"—finely dice into cubes one-tenth of an inch wide. I have done the reading, I assure you." He did the reading a few years ago, true, but potions are useful in a way not many things are.

Plus, with skin as pale as his, skin-burn balm is particularly interesting.

“On with it, then. I wrote down some alternations to the recipe that I want to try, and Slughorn will only let me experiment once the basic version is finished.” His voice wraps around the word ‘basic’ like it wants to strangle it and leave its corpse to rot in the streets. It’s lovely and elitist in just the right way.

“As you wish. Hand me the—My thanks.”

Against all odds, the class is a smashing success. Part of that is, yes, because Itachi’s mood is magically managed, but part is that Snape is a snarky little monster and an undeniable genius at potions. Even at eleven, he is blessed with a subconscious, instinctive understanding of the art that goes miles beyond academia. His method is too physical and too dynamic for it to be book-learning and logic.

Itachi plays the part of an assistant happily. He has neither the talent, the zeal or the inclination to compete. They work together well, Snape unbothered by anything not potions-related and Itachi happy to bask in the uncomplicated delight of a child doing what it loves best.

Three of the four variations are a failure, even to Itachi’s eye. The fourth one will do—something, but it is unclear what it will be.

“Write it down—Write it down—What did I add after the moaning melon peel—”

“No need to fret,” he says quietly, so as not to startle the frenzied child. “The notes I kept will meet even your demanding standards.”

“The notes? What notes? You kept notes? Give them here!” Snape rips the parchment from his hands with such effusive, manic joy, that a helpless smile spreads on Itachi’s face. Snape, on the other hand, freezes in place, the bubble of euphoria burst by the action.

“Why don’t I make you a copy,” Itachi says, flexing his wrist so his wand is released from its sheath on his forearm.

It’s a pleasure to hold his trusted partner again. He kept it close, of course, but it’s not the same. His magic connects with that of the wand, and he swallows a content sigh. Beautiful.

“May I?”

Snape hands him the notes without a word, black eyes jumping from Itachi’s face to his wand, to the roll of parchment.

“This won’t take half a moment.”

The Charm is a simple one, less exhausting than *Geminio* and thus less stable. The conjuration will disappear in an hour or so and isn’t capable of copying texts longer than thirty or so pages.

“*Dipló*.”

With how often he’s performed the charm for Regulus, he doesn’t need the movements or the incantation. Best not show off, however. Silent casting, he’s pretty sure, is typically taught in later years—for some unknowable reason.

“Here you are. They are fairly basic conjurations—I would recommend copying them manually within the hour. Thank you for a most engaging lesson, Master Snape. As much as I enjoy our theoretical discussion, the practical application of your theories is where you shine. My sincere compliments.”

“What?”

Snape is adorable when he blushes, he notes. It's not patchy or violent. A soft, rosy hue spreads over his cheeks and makes him look approximately four years old. Not cherubic, not with a face that long and narrow, but gentle and delicate.

"I would be honoured if you would consider partnering with me in the future. Merry part."

Chapter End Notes

Pardon my adult-children? I will fix it at some point, I swear.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Floof

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Friday, Sep 17 th 1971)

By the time dinner swings around, even Garnall starts sending cautious, if well-hidden, looks his way.

The DADA fiasco is to blame for a part of it, a pointless bit of drama Itachi would never have entertained if not for James. Unfortunately, James had a bone to pick, and James was to be indulged in all ways. Once he decided to expose the instructor's unwillingness to interact with Itachi, they were all locked into their positions and the show had to get played out.

Credit where credit's due, the man—MacCavity, apparently—stuck to his principles. As per James' command, Itachi broke his unofficial rule of never volunteering to answer a question or participate in class and the game was on. A simple game, granted, but, apparently, necessary. The formula was simple. MacCavity would ask a question, Itachi would raise his hand to answer, get ignored and watch as James bristled further.

Itachi couldn't rustle up any real upset if he tried. One prejudiced wizard is so below his threshold for irritation, that it doesn't even compute. If anything, the MacCavity is to be gently ridiculed. Who decides to demonstrate their political ideology by ignoring an eleven-year-old? A crazy person, that's who. The ex-Auror would have been better off if he'd challenged Itachi, the apparent spokesperson for all things evil. He'd have been better served by practically every other strategy other than petulantly playing chicken with a child.

His badgers disagree, James disagrees and Itachi is picking up Garnall's disquiet, facade or no facade. Either his guard is Dark—doubtful—or he has Dark witches or wizards in his team

—significantly more likely. It will be mildly amusing to see how that will play out over the next couple of months.

From DADA it was straight to Healer Rosier, for his weekly mind-healing season. Garnall, of course, comes with. Itachi's emotions have been close to the surface for a while, there is no need for Rosier to coax and prod him into digging into them. It unsettles the Healer. Garnall is, naturally, horrified.

The topic of today's session is Orion Black. While the whole mess is as clear-cut as anything is in life, Itachi is still an adult and as such isn't blessed with a streamlined, childish view of causality. It would be lovely if he could be like Timothy. Timothy accepts that sometimes you have to do bad things to survive and lives that concept, emotionally and rationally. Itachi, on the other hand, is a writhing mass of *if*s and *but*s and *should've*s and *could've*s. If he had made more of an effort, if he had tried to run, if he had asked Arcturus for help earlier, etcetera, etcetera.

While he doesn't feel like they had accomplished much in the ninety minutes they had, his thoughts do feel tidier. Rosier is well-equipped to handle Itachi's method of dealing with life. He never makes empty statements, always leads with a philosophical concept and guides him through applying that concept to the specific place where his thoughts have hit a snag. It's a pleasure, no matter how taxing it always is.

There is next to no time between the healing session and dinner. He'd have liked—Well, he'd have liked to do almost anything but eat while being gawked at. Unfortunately, not only will the Elves mutiny if he tries to eat more than one meal in the kitchens, but he is also expecting mail.

Garnall walks a bit closer to him than before. Something about him suggests a—sharpening, for lack of a better term. He looks bigger and broader, his steps are softer and suggest an awareness of his body he had kept under wraps before. It could also be his magic? Either way, his guard is telegraphing subtle but effective '*come on, if you think you're hard enough*' vibes, which makes moving through the school much easier. Not a single insult is hissed in his general direction, which is somewhat disheartening. He had tried hard not to intimidate the children into behaving.

"Merry meet," he says, sitting down. "I hope nothing out of the ordinary had occurred while I was occupied?"

“Nothing much,” says Timothy. Lies Timothy, more like. Lady wept, what now? “I mean it. Let’s just, not, yeah? Let’s just have dinner.”

The weary tone speaks much louder than the half-hearted assurances. Huh. Itachi needs to spoil his badgers a little. The constant jumping from drama to drama has started to leave lasting marks. Timothy will bounce back, Itachi doesn’t doubt it, but it will take him more effort to do so.

“As you wish. Andrew? Noah? Do you agree?”

Noah sends him a weak but honest smile, while Andrew is suspended at the meeting point of vindictive pleasure and hurt pride. Well, it seems that whatever happened, they held their own. “Absolutely,” says Noah. “I really, really want to have a nice, quiet meal.”

Well. “I can give you nice, but how attached are you to quiet? If you are, I can try to arrange food in our rooms.” Kreacher would help if it came down to it.

Timothy re-settles his shoulders in a gesture so adult, it has to be picked up from his parents, or an authority figure he respects enough to mimic. “Why? What do you know?”

“I don’t know anything for certain, of course,” he says, “but I have sent some letters to some people earlier. I don’t know if they will answer tonight, but if they do—”

“Do I want to know?”

Itachi frowns, concern swallowing up other emotions that float around his exhausted psyche. “Nothing to be worried about. Just a gift for James that I asked Regulus to handle. Do you want to leave? It will come or not, I need not be here.”

“No, no, don’t mind me,” says Timothy. Miraculously, he’s perking up, shine returning to his eyes. “I am a bit tired, sure, but I want to see this. We had a whole thing, back home. Unbirthday presents. Small things, trinkets, but Dad always says we should celebrate the people in our lives all the time, not just on the anniversary of their birth.”

Well.

“Just in case I wasn’t already clear,” he says, making sure to catch Timothy’s eyes. “Your family is a never-ending fountain of wonder and light and all things that are good and pure in this world.” Also—something to keep in mind. Gifts for Timothy. He casts a considering look towards Andrew and Noah. Better yet, gifts for all his kids. He can get Regulus to coordinate. His brother could do with a task that has nothing to do with Black family drudgery.

“Thank you.” For once Timothy doesn’t bother with embarrassed denial. Homesick, perhaps? Considering neither of his three kids has a post-owl, that could be a gift idea? “They’re pretty great. I can’t wait for you to meet them. I know you have this thing with Mum, but you’ll like Dad more. Plus I’ve got a bunch of siblings, which is fun.”

Wait.

“Goodness, I didn’t even think to ask. Please, do tell. Siblings are a privilege above any other; I am glad you are so blessed.”

Timothy’s expression melts completely into warm, gooey affection. “Well, I have two brothers and three sisters. Kathleen—Kat—is the oldest, then Felix, then Jamie—James, sorry, Steph and Ella—Stephana and Grizella—are fourteen, and then there’s me.”

So many—Itachi’s mind stutters a little. Shinobi very rarely had more than two kids. Black Family tried for more, but three was an outside limit, realistically speaking. Timothy’s Lady mother had five children—how extraordinary. “Beautiful,” he says with feeling. “Truly.”

“I’m looking forward to you meeting them. I wrote about you, of course, but they go to schools too, boarding school for Ella and Steph, and Uni for Kat, Jamie and Felix. I can’t just send them an owl.”

“I look forward to it.” Make a note: warding the home might not be enough if all of Timothy’s siblings have separate living arrangements.

“I have an older sister, as I’ve mentioned,” says Andrew. “Lorelai is everything you could want in an older sister. Older than me by quite a bit, smart, ambitious. She was in Slytherin when she was in school.”

Ouch. A half-blood witch with a Muggle name in Slytherin—without a Heir Black to keep the snakes in line. “That would’ve been an experience. My compliments to Miss Clarke. She sounds like a formidable witch.”

Andrew huffs a little, miles away. “Yeah, Lai is something. She just about tore my head off when she learned I made friends with you. First I get sorted in Hufflepuff and she thinks good, great, he’s keeping his head down. Then I befriended the most powerful child in Europe. I told her more about you, though; now she’s applauding my sneaky instincts. Fair warning, I’m pretty sure she thinks I’m swindling you for your gold and connections.”

“Very practical.” He nods his approval. “I like it. Please, swindle away. I would personally recommend you focus on gold and not connections, but it’s up to you.”

“I’m the oldest,” says Noah. “You’ll like my brats too. Evie—Eyva is five, and the twins—Kilean and Declan—are three.”

Lady have mercy. “Toddlers,” says Itachi, slightly wide-eyed. “Noah, dear, you know how I feel about babies.”

“I have a couple of clues, yes,” Noah says. “Completely appropriate in this case. All three of them are as cute as anything. None are magic, that we know. We’ll see; I only started showing signs when I was ten or so.”

“When are their birthdays,” asks Timothy, miles happier than he’d been at the start of the meal.

“December sixth for Kili and Lan, and March fourth for Evie. I left my gifts for the twins with Ma, which was a hassle, let me tell you. It’s impossible to keep a secret from those two. Fast little buggers, with a nose for sniffing out secrets.”

Itachi’s eyes grow even larger, as his heart squeezes. Sneaky babies. Reg couldn’t afford to be anything but well-behaved, but Sasuke? Baby-Sasuke was lightning-quick when he was thus inclined. Quick and wiggly—

“Well, that’s torn it,” says Andrew, eyes bright and laughing. “You made your bed, Noah. When the twins’ birthday comes and you get a Black Family gift in the mail worth more than your house, I will laugh at you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I will stay within appropriate limits,” Itachi lies like a liar. “You would not forbid me from celebrating your baby brothers’ day of birth, would you Noah? You wouldn’t be so cruel?”

“I mean,” says Noah, befuddled. “Look, you can’t go crazy. We do presents in the Muggle world too, that’s not weird, but they’re turning four; they don’t need anything.”

Itachi sends Noah a look precisely as derisive as that statement deserves. Four-year-old baby boys not needing anything his shiny kunai. They need *everything.*

“I need intel,” he says, regrouping. “I will be writing to your parents on the weekend, to introduce myself and you all must advise me on the best approach. I only have the one opportunity to make a good impression, and now the stakes include access to *babies*.”

Noah looks a bit alarmed, but Timothy nods—truly the sweetest of his kids. “I’m sure you don’t need to worry about it, but we’ll help. Especially with things like not including the phrase ‘access to babies’ which makes you sound unhinged.”

“Perfect, yes, that is exactly what I had in mind. People don’t like me as a rule, I need all the help I can get. Plus, I’ve never even seen a non-magical human, much less interacted with

one. I need lessons, Timothy, so many lessons."

Where will he even fit lessons? His schedule, especially once Aunt Dorea gets her claws on him for her PR work, is harrowing already.

Babies, though.

Timothy frowns, losing some of his earlier sparkle. "You don't, I was joking. You're great. Compared to how awful Muggle rich kids are, you're an angel."

Angel? Never mind.

"Thank you, dear. Nevertheless, my point stands. I am somewhat familiar with your Lady mother's work, so that gives me some idea about how to approach. Andrew's Miss Clarke lives in the Magical world and has gone to Slytherin besides. But Noah, I've got nothing. The only thing I know is that your family is very Christian, which is a point against me. Blacks have polytheists for, what, a bit under two millennia, give or take?"

"Shut up," says Timothy. "No way can you trace your family back for two thousand years. The English monarchy can trace it back, what, a couple of centuries. Maybe a millennium, I don't know."

Itachi blinks, genuine surprise yanking him out of his baby-oriented mood. "Truly? That is—I had not known that. I say two millennia because that's when the Blacks came over to the Isles with the Romans. We could go back further, but it's considered gauche to count back to before we were a part of the British soil and Magic."

Even Andrew looks a bit weirded out by this. Huh. This *is* strange. Itachi can't imagine a society that doesn't pay attention to genealogy. Blacks are nothing compared to others in Europe, never mind abroad.

“We’re not the only ones,” he continues slowly. “All of the Ancient and Noble Houses can trace back their lineage for at least a millennium. Shafiq can do a whole lot more. And don’t even ask about the noble clans in China.”

“Right,” says Noah. “Don’t mention that, I don’t think. You can say you’re a, uh, pagan. It will count against you but you’re a kid; they’re not going to take you seriously about anything. As long as you are okay with them being very insensitive about it, you’re fine.”

“Good, good now—”

The post arrives, perhaps fortuitously. He doesn’t know how he got so completely side-tracked, but he’s gotten some invaluable info out of it, so that makes up for it overall. Now, if he is not mistaken—

Indeed, a barely muffled shriek comes from the red-and-green table, followed by a screech of wood-on-stone and finally hurried footsteps. It’s made more obvious by the hush that falls onto the Great Hall—

“Incoming,” says Andrew under his breath, propping his chin by his palms, elbows planted on the table—the very picture of a person looking forward to an entertaining piece of theatre.

“Siri,” whisper-shouts James, as he all but climbs into Itachi’s lap in his excitement. “This is mad—How on Earth did you manage this? Does Uncle know? Does Aunt ‘Rea? I swear, if they try to take them from me I will burn down the Nest and everything inside it—”

“You will have to go to Regulus for details,” he says, trying and failing to extract himself. “I would be very seriously alarmed if he had made a mistake that elementary. The general idea was mine, but the execution was all Reg.”

“I can’t believe it! You’re the *best* Siri, I swear to Merlin—”

“Hiyah, Potter,” says Timothy with a wide, pointy smile that suggests a part of his happiness is caused by someone else’s lack of the same. “Hate to interrupt, really, but curiosity will eat me alive and you’re about a minute away from getting a detention. Siri mentioned a gift?”

“Timothy, Timmy, Tim,” babbles James. “He got me a stable of Abraxans and a racing track!”

“*We* got you a *small* flock of Abraxans and a ten-year lease on a racing track,” Itachi corrects. “The track itself would be a bit excessive, perhaps.” Maybe as a coming-of-age gift?

“Right, right,” hums Timothy. “Abraxans would be—”

“Winged horses,” says Andrew, wide-eyed. “Think pegasus but bigger. About double the size of a real horse, maybe.”

Timothy nods, smile widening even further. He looks like he will start laughing any second and Itachi is a bit confused. He’s glad his badgers aren’t envious, but it’s not funny. It’s a nice gift. Thoughtful, even. Everyone knows Potters are hopelessly addicted to adrenaline. “And I’m guessing they’re all rare and priceless and all that?”

“So rare,” breathes James. “So gorgeous. House Black has been raising Abraxans for centuries. They have a giant estate in Peru for them. It’s beyond beautiful. Aunt Dorea has been taking me to see them since I was able to walk.”

“Has she? She never mentioned that.” Damn, he possibly spoiled a gift she had in the works. Make a note to ask Reg about it.

“Yeah. She always refused to let me ride them, though. Not until I get a license.”

Right.“That is still absolutely true. As luck would have it, the racing track is the perfect place to get your certification. Reg and I will possibly join you over the summer if time permits.”

Andrew laughs, leaning a bit forward in his chair, head still propped up by his palms. “You two I swear. You’re usually so down to earth and nerdy, and then you do stuff like this and I remember how obscenely rich you are.”

Is it rude? Is Itachi rude? Why not ask?

“James, are we rude?” He pauses for a moment, thinking— “Badgers, same question? You all know how under-socialised I am. Are we being obnoxious?”

“Absolutely,” says Andrew, but he’s smiling, so. Mixed signals? “You’re very obnoxious, but everybody else has been so much worse, they deserve to have your happiness rubbed in their faces a little.” A theatrical pause. “A lot. Rubbed in their faces a lot and as often as you can manage.”

Timothy nods, features set in a firm expression. “Anybody who would have a problem with two friends giving gifts to each other is an idiot. You’re not hurting anybody. It’s your money and your angel-horses and your, whatever, drug-berries.”

“I agree,” says James. “The kids in the school have given up their right to be heard about how you live your life.”

Itachi sighs, yanking his head out of the way before James ruffles his hair like a proud aunt. “I don’t care about the children’s view of my friendships, but I don’t want to be rude. You will tell me if I am? All of you?”

“Sure,” says Timothy, the pleasant tone undermined by the schadenfreude dripping from his ears. “If I ever feel you’ve crossed some sort of line, I will correct you, no problem.”

“I’ll take it. James, *please*, I am happy you like your gift, but we can’t both fit in the chair. Moreover, I’m approximately half of your volume, you will crush me—No, the reverse is not better. Do you want me to get detention?—I can’t sit in your lap, dear, not only would

Madam Woodward have me in detention until June, but Aunt Dorea would roast my lungs on a spit—”

***

Chapter End Notes

Filler and fluff. Now, now we can finally skip some shit because these two days? 35k at least.

Also, quick question. Can you guys keep up with the names and all that? Do you want me to make a glossary?

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

New freinds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday, Sunday 19 th September, 1971

Itachi is lulled—Itachi desperately allows himself to be lulled—into a false sense of security by how calm and normal Saturday is. Not a thing happens. Not a damn thing. Reg visits for a little while on Friday and can't visit at all on Saturday—Lord Black is away from the Castle, and the Wards are thus raised to withstand a siege. They're hopeful for Sunday, but every weekday should be fine.

Saturday, he spends in their rooms. He doesn't leave for a damn moment. Kreacher sneaks him food, his badgers come and go, and he just—lazes around. Doesn't read, do any work, nothing. Just pure calm and luxury. He takes a two-hour long bath and spends a glorious forty-five minutes waiting for the hair-care potion to soak in, followed by a further two and a half hours spent rubbing this or that ointment, lotion or potion into every available inch of skin.

All of it is glorious: the food, the pampering, the sheer pointless banality of it all. Garnall laughs his squeaky laugh at him thirteen separate times, that's how relaxed they both are. They don't talk about much. The day is about re-charging.

James is the only one to join him in his pampering sessions, even if he is less enthusiastic about it. He has odd hangups, accepting a cotton bath-robe but not a silk one, refusing to so much as touch his cosmetics potions but accepting to sit by the fire-place and spell their fingernails blue, in James' case, and a soft violet-red in Itachi's.

The kids ooh and aah at Itachi's wand, which edges too close to real-world topics for Itachi's liking, especially considering Garnall is interested. He pretends to not notice the sharp gaze, and focuses, instead, on entertaining the kids with some leisure spells he had picked up over the years.

"I told you I all but raised Reg, yes?" Those were kind years, all told. Stressful and dark and twisted, but also beautiful in their way. There was honesty, of a sort, a straightforward relationship between action and consequence he finds himself nostalgic about. "Magic made that a whole lot simpler. I could show you a few simpler spells?"

"Please," breathes Timothy. "I can't believe you had years to learn magic. That's so cool!"

"One of many inequalities in our society, I'm afraid." What are you doing—stop it with the serious talk. "It was very reckless, in hindsight, but Kreacher was always there to keep us in line. Here—this is one of the first spells I learned."

He doesn't know how to cast this with a wand. He's only ever done it wandlessly. With a vague thought of apology to his partner, he focuses, visualising the shape and the feel of the conjuration, fills it with his magic, forces the whole thing into a three-dimensional structure —

A large, ghostly dog appears. As usual, it's little more than a see-through bit of light given shape. Said shape is a bit cartoonish, visibly an artistic rendering of a dog rather than a true likeness. What it lacks in solidity it makes up for in animation. Even to his critical eye, the dog is adorable, stumbling over too-large paws and wiggling around the kids in delight, tail whipping.

Timothy claps, laugh ringing through the room. James' laughter joins his, and soon all his kids are loud and merry, and Itachi is happy enough to burst.

"Jesus Christ, Siri," says Timothy. "That's amazing. Where did you learn that spell?"

Garnall hums, eyes softer than Itachi thought they could get. "That's not a spell, kid," he says. "That's wandless magic. Intent and determination and a deliberate mind. Good work,

baby-Black. I imagine this was made with your brother in mind?”

“My Reggie loved dogs,” Itachi replies, too warm and content to even bother with bitterness. “I suspect in large part because of me. Sirius, you know. The Dog Star. Kreacher told us stories.”

“Why the past tense,” asks Timothy, his mind still visibly on the dog jumping around the room just a bit too high and bouncy for a real dog. “Was he bit?”

Itachi doesn’t tense, but James does. His cousin’s eyes widen, without so much a hint of subtlety. Enough to catch not only Garnall’s interest but Andrew’s too. Huh—he wouldn’t have thought Aunt Dorea would’ve told James about that particular bit of Black Family insanity.

“Nothing as simple as that I’m afraid,” he says, smiling a little to show he isn’t bothered very much. “Also very unpleasant and too depressing to talk about. Suffice it to say, we don’t bring up dogs much, these days. But before, Lady love me, some days it was the only thing I could do to keep him entertained. Dogs and—”

He waves his hand, twisting his magic just so—

The ceiling darkens into a pitch black and little dots wink into existence, forming—

Noah physically wiggles in place in delight. “Stars!”

“A Black who loves constellations, colour me surprised,” says Garnall.

“Mm, I can only do a few, I’m afraid. Kreacher knows hundreds and hundreds—thousands, probably, if he set his mind to it. Stories, too, although I suspect he had invented quite a few of them on the spot.” Far too many of them centred on two brothers who set on various adventures and accomplished their goals against all odds with the power of their love for each other.

“Aunt Rea did something similar for me,” hums James, eyes trained on the ceiling. “I never really got into Astronomy, much to her annoyance. I was too dynamic for stories, I wanted to move and play and act. I set up little plays, acting out this or that story to Aunt Rea and Uncle Charles. And my toys, of course. They were the best audience. Uncle Charlus would charm them to applaud when I’m done.”

Sounds lonely, thinks Itachi. He is unfair—James’ parents might have died when he was a baby, but he was raised by very attentive, kind parental figures. Still—Itachi would be raised by murderous lunatics a hundred times over if the alternative meant not having Reg with him. As the first two years of his life have demonstrated, Itachi Uchiha, when confronted with a lack of a little brother to love, will lay down and wait for death.

Sad thoughts, sad thoughts.

“I’d love to be in a play with you,” he says instead. A little impulsive, perhaps, but not untrue. Itachi is a Shinobi, among other things. He can perform any and every role under the sun, unselfconsciously and earnestly. He might not enjoy it, doesn’t see much value in the craft, but he can do it and he can do it well.

James beams at him in honest delight, and Itachi lets his star-conjuration face, light brightening the room again. “You should not have said that. I love-love-*love* acting, and will take you up on your words even if they are just politeness.”

“Just as well that I was telling the truth. I don’t have the time to organise it, but I’d gladly be in a play with you if you handle the rest. What about the rest of you? Would you be interested in staging a play with us?”

Noah shakes his head sharply, horror-struck by the very thought.”No-no-no. No. I’m afraid not. Thanks, just the same. The idea of being on a stage makes me want to cry and puke and hide under my bed for fifty years.”

“Fair enough,” says James, eying Noah with a sort of baffled pity of a born and raised extrovert encountering a shy peer. “You could still work on it if you want. You could help

with the script, costumes, and set design? Only if you want. Oh, by the by, I am taking this promise and running with it, Siri. It's too late to back out now."

Itachi sends a fond smile his way. "Go ahead. You know as well as I do how hectic my schedule is, but I will make time, on the weekend if nothing else. If you want to stage a play, you will get a play. That's just how it will be. Noah, dear, you don't have to decide now. As you can see, we're very much in the beginning stages."

"I'd love to help if you'll have me," says his shiest child. "It sounds like so much fun. Magical theatre, imagine."

"I can imagine, very clearly, and what I see is glory and wonder," crows James. "Tim, 'Drew, how about you two? Nal, I fear you're a lost cause, I won't even ask."

Andrew looks torn between excitement for the idea and instinctive dread of potential embarrassment. Timothy is much the same.

"I—think I want to," says Timothy. "I think? I don't know, I love the idea of messing about in private, but doing it on a stage? Where would we do it? Who would even watch?"

Andrew chokes on a laugh and has to spend a long moment hacking, impeded by the fact he is still laughing. "Who would—who would *watch*? Who would watch—*everyone* would watch. The entire *school* would watch. There would be reporters in the crowd. Our Siri? The most talked about kid in the world, most likely? Acting in a play with Heir Potter? Everybody would watch!"

Itachi waves a hand, making it extra airy and ridiculous for effect. "I'm already limited in my day-to-day life because of who I am. The upside, the thing that makes it all worth it, is that I have a large amount of freedom when it comes to the big things. Such as, for example, the fact that if I want to put on a play with my dear cousin, I will put on a play. It can be in Hogwarts, but it doesn't have to be." He will rent the damn Bacchus Theatre if it comes to that.

***

Sunday morning is spent writing letters to his badgers' families. They aren't as forthcoming as he'd hoped, possibly because Timothy is on a mission to prove that Itachi is good enough and doesn't need any help to get adults to love him.

Considering the sheer number of adults that want to murder him, kidnap him or assault him, that seems like a doomed venture. Still—it's bad form to bring it up. At the end of the day, Itachi is entirely too comfortable with circumventing the will of stronger political figures than three non-magical families. His kids will be safe, parental permission or no parental permission.

The wacky portion of the weekend begins when four of Garnall's team floos over.

Garnall, for one, is beyond thrilled to finally have some backup. He survived the weekend because Itachi stayed in his rooms like a good stationary client. That said, the longer Garnall stayed out of the loop, the more tense he became. Itachi can distantly sympathise. He's never led a team, but he can imagine that being cut off from them would be unpleasant.

"Alright, baby Black, my team is outside. Im'ma go and do some routine checks for potions, spells and all that good stuff. Why don't you stay where you are? In fact—" With a lazy flick, Garnall's wand rolls into his hand. Another flick, and he starts weaving charms—likely of the protective variety—around Itachi. "Perfect. Sit tight, kid."

Itachi, content to lay in a half-daze, curled up on the rug in front of the fireplace, doesn't so much as twitch. His badgers are upstairs, doing homework of all asinine things, James is spinning chaos somewhere, and Itachi doesn't have to do a single thing. Garnall's team is going to be interesting, but he will deal with them when he's more awake.

Blink—blink—alright, maybe a nap—

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When he wakes up, some indeterminate time later, he's treated to an unusual sight of his badgers chatting animatedly with strangers.

Who would *dare*—

"Woah, kid, cool it with the magic!"

Who—Garnall. Garnall is here, calm down—His hazy mind kicked into overdrive takes a moment to understand, and a longer moment to get a grip on his magic that took exception to intruders in his space, talking to his kids.

"My apologies," he says, bowing low, low enough to hide how short of breath he is. The fitness of this body is truly abysmal. "I over-reacted."

"No worries. Well, some worries, but nothing too important." Garnall's smile is a bit tense around the edges, which matches the steely glint in his eyes. "Come on, then. Meet the rest of the people tasked with, as you are so fond of saying, securing your life and liberty."

Right. He sends his badgers an entirely artificial sheepish look and straightens his spine.

The first thing he thinks when he sees the group of four is: dangerous. The witch in the front especially. Of an average height, not young by any measure—around the first half of her second century and definitely a Pureblood. That sort of facial symmetry happens with considerable pre-natal magic and extensive selective breeding. What makes her stand out, are the scars. Dark magic scars, and plenty of them. The unselfconscious way she carries herself is striking; a beautiful woman made more beautiful by the eventful life she'd led. Dangerous.

"Alexandra Lelia Corvi," she says, taking a half-step towards him, and inclining her head by a few degrees.

He knows that voice. That would be 'Lali'? "Merry meet, Lady Corvi." Better safe than sorry. He distantly knows there is a Pureblood House in Italy of that name, but he could be

wrong. “Please, call me Sirius. I would hope my badgers have impressed the value of informality onto you already.” He pauses for a beat, thinking— “Plus, you already saw me sleep on the floor like a house pet. No way to go from here but up.”

The witch doesn’t unthaw for so much as a moment. She’s not hostile, he doesn’t think. Not derisive, or judging. Just still and wary. “I don’t know. People are honest when they wake up. Your reaction was a telling one.”

Oh? Is that what we’re doing? A spark of heat runs through his veins, his magic easy to condense under his skin. “Is that surprising, Lady? You know who raised me. You know why you’re here in the first place. What is an appropriate reaction to four strangers talking to my badgers?”

He notes with half an ear the sounds of his kids clucking in alarm, picking up on Itachi’s tension. Garnall is a steady, silent presence to the side. Even now, the man doesn’t register as a threat.

“Nothing about any of this is appropriate. If you’re asking if I approve, I cannot answer. You reacted like a warrior, Sirius Black. I saw no hesitation in your body or magic. I cannot approve of that.”

Well, that’s dramatic.

“I like your patronus.” When in doubt, change the topic. Subtlety won’t work on this one, not on any level Itachi is capable of, anyway.

Her smirk is as bold as the rest of her, a crooked slash of the lips painted crimson. “I hear I will like yours too.”

He nods, satisfied. Tension in his body will take some time to release completely, but he can mask it, distribute it so that his limbs appear loose. It won’t fool a professional, not with the too-casual slope of his shoulders or how much of his weight is still on the balls of his feet. Enough to communicate his willingness to play nice?

Garnall shifts beside him. “Alright, that’s enough of that. Kid, stop acting like a piraña. Lali, stop bonding with the kid by encouraging his worst impulses. It’s hard enough to get him to act his age, I don’t need you making him worse, Merlin wept. Come on, you lot. We don’t have all day.”

The two men—identical twins—step forward. Fully adult, his mind notes. Prime of their life. Giant. Strong. Could snap him like a twig. Foreign, almost as pale as Itachi, with ice-blond hair and ice-blue eyes. With those cheekbones and wrists, probably Dark purebloods—

Nope. Magic-wise, at least, both are white as snow and just as comforting. Goodness.

“Nikolai Milanovich Sokolov,” says one in a heavy, rolling accent—Russian. Well, there goes professionalism. He’s going to be such an embarrassing mess around these men, he can already tell. “I answer to Kolya. Honour.”

“Merry meet, ah. Kolya.” Alright, so he stammered for a bit. He likes Russian. It’s both similar and dissimilar to Chikyūgo, except it’s even more lyrical somehow.

The other twin notices the brief pause and somehow conveys the sentiment of being pleasantly surprised without moving a single facial muscle. “Aleksei Milanovich Sokolov. Lyosha. Pleasure. You speak Russian?”

“Merry met, Lyosha.” No stammer—well done. “My adopted parent picked up a little. Enough to read parts of the stories in the original.” He pauses, gauging his audience here—Nah. If they’re bigoted against Muggleborns, they would be banned from his presence anyways. “Vasilisa Prekrasna, most notably, but also bits and pieces of Pushkin. My brother is a great fan of Russian muggle lit.” Crime and Punishment? Reg had loved it for years, ever since Itachi had introduced the concept that his beloved older brother spent a life murdering people for money. Since the Orion Black debacle, it has become more pertinent than ever.

“We-ell,” says Garnall, tone winding upwards in a way that suggests infinite ribbing in the future. “Black’s a Commie, have the others mentioned that?”

Normally, he'd scoff, but when two Russians look at you with visible approval, you preen first and deal with the fallout later. "I am an admirer at most. I look forward to introducing you to Regulus. Grandfather was in the process of hiring tutors before, ah. Before he got derailed by all this unpleasantness."

Unpleasantness. He cracks himself up sometimes.

The last man—boy, really, barely into adulthood—steps forward. Step is not the right term; the teenager bounces forward, all enthusiasm and gangly limbs he hasn't quite gotten under control. Or pretends not to have, which is more likely. "Yuanjun of Clan Zhen, Heir Black," he chirps, bowing a bit too low for it to be appropriate. Low enough, that he overbalances, stumbling forward an extra step, arms windmilling. "Call me Yuū, please, I will not remember the other. Merry meet?"

Itachi, slightly wide-eyed, bows right back. "Merry meet, Master Zhen." No way can he use such an affectionate nickname. Alright, the double standard is there—he will call the Russians whatever they want to be called, but that's the Russians. This teenager? Not a chance. "Do excuse me if this is invasive, but I can't quite place your accent?"

"Oh, wow, please, no last names. I am the rookie, it would be so awkward. I am from the Pure Lands." He blinks and tilts his head. "Luoyun Empire, that is. Pure Lands is the colloquial term. Or we can go with Magical China. That works better, in these parts. You lot can get myopic about these things."

His speech is less accented than Lyosha and Kolya's, but the foreign twist is audible. The o's are deeper and rounder. There is a definite softness to his vowels and a suggestion that even the harsh English consonants would be filed down into something lovelier. The r's, of course, are a lost cause, turning into loose, merry o's and a's.

With that said, he is in no state to legislate the wholly undeserved sense of superiority among Europeans. "My sincere congratulations, Garnall," he says, partially turning to his guard. "You appear to have surrounded yourself with wholly excellent talent. I'm sure I speak for my badgers when I say I look forward to working with you, lady and gentlewizards."

"Damn, kid, you can just say you need a baby to pet."

Whoosh.

Well, that's a way to end a conversation. He throws himself bodily at the wiggling, stumbling clutch of powder-blue baby crocodiles, and checks out.

"A timer, please," he has enough presence of mind to say. "Thank you."

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Once his babies have vanished—and he spent the requisite half-hour meditating to bring himself back into the mind space necessary to inhabit a world not exclusively populated by conjured dreams—it is time to continue with his day.

"Dinner, Siri. C'mon."

Itachi levels his least amused look at Andrew. "I don't see any reason why I would spend any time in the Great Hall I am not expressly required to. I will have to interact with the children all week, Andrew, be reasonable."

"The grown-up talk doesn't work on me, doofus. I've just watched you tickle the toes of baby crocodiles for ten straight minutes. C'mon. Heir Black doesn't hide in his rooms all weekend!"

"Heir Black has been granted a respite. A time away from the gossip and the staring and the *noise*. Timothy—back me up."

Timothy looks up from where he was lacing his shoes. "Sorry mate. I'm with him on this one. You need to be seen out and about. Also, the school needs to get used to your new guards. Garnall looks like Prince Charming, he was an easy sell. The new four? No offence meant,

Masters Sokolov and Mistress Corvi, but you are terrifying. I am terrified, and you've been nothing but kind to me."

"None taken," says—purrs—Lady Corvi. "Call me Lali, would you? You are much too young and adorable for anything else."

Well.

"Note how I'm not terrifying," says Yuanjun, elbowing Kolya with, frankly, an ill-advised amount of force. "The kids love me. I am very lovable."

"You are a child yourself, Yuū," says Garnall, preventing Kolya from scruffing the younger wizard. "Plus, let's be real. Baby-Black's got his favourites, and it's not you."

"Pure chance. The bears are working with an advantage, but I will prevail! No way will any kid prefer those two over me!"

Did he forget Itachi is, in fact, right next to them?

"This is not how I imagined a security team would be," says Noah under his breath, having finished getting ready. "I was worried they would be stern and adult."

Oh, they are very adult, thinks Itachi. Just very good at putting children at ease. Yuanjun, for example, has magic almost as dark and thick as Itachi's. He doesn't think the young Hitwizard's enthusiasm and silliness are all an act, but it's certainly not the whole truth.

"I did not hope they would be this interesting," he says, after a short pause. "Perhaps I should have. It was Uncle Alphard that provided the contact."

"Oh?"

“Mm. Uncle Alphard—Great Uncle, to be precise—is a colourful wizard. Lives on a ship, and travels across the globe. Collects old artefacts along the way.”

“A pirate,” says Noah, with the sort of tired amusement that comes with spending a prolonged period observing the Black Family. “Your Great-Uncle is a pirate.”

“An adventurer,” he says, meeting his look with a rueful one of his own. “He doesn’t pillage, I don’t think. Surely that would have caused something of a scandal.” He does pillage, only he limits himself to other pirates, whenever the mood strikes him.

“Sure. Why not? Man, your family is weird. And that’s the one married to a Japanese lord?”

“Mm. Takeda-sama. Now that *is* a scandal. They’re not married, you see. They’ve been in a committed relationship for over two decades and not a word about a bonding ceremony.” Come to think of it, he should probably start calling him Daigo-sama. The last thing he wants to do is give the impression that he’s enforcing some sort of distance between them to delegitimise their relationship. They had enough of that by now.

Noah laughs, a clear, lovely sound, habitually muffled by a hand. “Sure. That’s the shocking part. Makes sense.”

“Part and parcel of the pureblood experience, I’m afraid. Not all families are as bad as mine. Longbottoms are practically tame. Even among the Dark families, we are something of an outlier. Been around the longest, have the most gold to spend and a propensity towards obsessive personalities. We get cut a lot of slack.” And among the Japanese, they’re young, arrogant upstarts who should sit down, shut up and listen to their betters.

“Stop stalling,” calls Andrew, from a few meters away. “Noah, stop enabling him. Up you go, get yourself in one of your fancy robes and off we go.”

Amaterasu have mercy.

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In an entirely unsurprising turn of events, the student body flips out when Itachi swans in with his newly expanded team of guards. Garnall walks right behind him, Kolya, Lyosha and Lee behind Timothy, Andrew and Noah, with Lady Corvi casually strolling a few meters behind, overseeing their little procession.

“I trust the faculty has been caught up,” he says to Garnall, as they’re about to enter the Great Hall.

“Yes, Heir Black,” comes the monotonous response.

How he hates that tone. All five of them have shamelessly retreated into stiff, professional shells as soon as they stepped foot outside of their rooms. Even Lee—especially Lee, considering he looks both older and so completely forgettable that Itachi gets the first tingling of caution. That is a useful, dangerous talent to have.

Instead of commenting, he sends a pitiful look Andrew’s way. See—his expression says. See what you’ve thrown us into?

Andrew just straightens even further somehow and marches through the Great Hall like he’s making a last stand, a heroic charge into enemy territory.

Fine.

***

“Heads up—”

“Siri!”

James, with his usual respect for Itachi’s personal space, hangs over bodily over the back of his chair. “What are you doing here? I was sure you’d not leave your spiffy new rooms for anything.”

“Merry meet, dear. Yes, well, my badgers have made it clear I am to spend some time out and about. Hold on, back up, let me introduce you to the new additions to my team.”

James doesn’t let go as such, but he executes a truly inspired manoeuvre which leaves him draped over Itachi’s back instead of his chair. “Please do.”

Introductions go—as well as can be expected. James is an intuitive kid as a rule, and he already knows the game from Garnall. They exchange their names and merry meet’s, James nods and bows as best he can without leaving his place hanging off of Itachi’s back, and they all pretend this is a very reasonable life situation.

“We need to find a permanent spell for my nails,” he says. “The cosmetic charms wear off within the day. How do girls handle it?”

Girls?

“Where you picked up the notion that cosmetic charms are for witches is beyond me. Look at my Lord Grandfather, look at Lord Takeda.” Damn. Next time, for sure. “Look at *me*. If you think Kreacher let me attend Hogwarts without having at least fifty cosmetic charms under my belt, you’ve not been paying attention.”

“Is that a thing,” Timothy jumps in. “That makeup and stuff is for both boys and girls.”

“Yes,” says Itachi, at the same time as James says “No”.

Well, what's this then?

"Huh," says Timothy, with a considering lilt. "I'd not have expected this. Aren't you two from the same caste, more or less?"

"We are," says Itachi. Then again— "If I'm being honest, James would be the person to ask, between us. Regulus and I got most of our social education from the Black Library in Grimmauld. And tutors, of course."

"Well, then, James," says Timothy, head tilted in a very bird-like fashion. "Why not? In the Muggle world, the fear is that a boy wearing makeup would be—girly. Feminine. Which is bad. There are some big prejudices that I won't get into here."

Good question. This is all news to Itachi, who would gladly cackle in the face of anyone who would think to tell him what he may or may not wear based on something as trivial as gender norms.

James' eyes jump from Timothy to Itachi and back to Timothy, wide in a persecuted, hunted sort of way. "It's an honest question, yeah? You aren't baiting me to say something dumb and insensitive? "

"Of course not," Itachi says, a little outraged. "I would not stand for it if nothing else. You can always assume I am interested in what you have to say."

"What he said, but less dramatic. Please, I am just curious, nothing bad."

"Okay, so, obviously I don't know, yeah? Nobody sat me down and said James, my boy, this is why boys don't paint their lips and wear skirts. My general understanding is that witches and wizards have different magic, yeah? That's just the truth. Witches are better at rituals, wizards are better at battle magic. Not all of them and not always, but, like, enough for that to be accepted as fact."

“What, really,” asks Noah, interested to the point of overcoming his fear of public talking.

“Sure. Witches are also better at group-casting, while wizards are better at internal magic like self-strengthening spells or healing spells. Like I said, this is only true on average, yeah? Am I getting that across?”

“Yes, dear, you are very clear,” he says, smoothing a fond arm down his shoulder blade.

“Okay, good, that was the tricky part. So, anyways, what you were born as, your body and stuff, all that doesn’t much matter. It’s all about the magic. And what you wear and how you act tells the rest of us what your alignment is; if you lean towards female magic or male magic.”

Timothy hums. “What if you are male, body and magic, but you like how girls dress? What happens then?”

“Oh, mm. Well, people will assume you are female-aligned. That’s fine, really, no problem. But if you are open about being fully male, I think a lot of witches would find it pretty disrespectful? Maybe? I don’t know, okay, I just know it’s not done.”

“And how do you know,” says Noah. “How do you know what your magic is?”

To his credit, James doesn’t blink, doesn’t hesitate for so much as a second. “You just know.”

Look at you, Aunt Dorea taught you well. He smooths his shoulder again just to show his appreciation. Itachi’d have probably blurted out the truth, and the Prophet will talk about nothing else for a week. ‘Black Admits to Illegal Ritual Magic’ ‘Heir Black Seduces Muggleborn Into Dark Rituals’.

“I knew about the orientations, obviously,” he says when all his three badgers turn his way. “I didn’t know about the social aspect of it. It is no secret, however, that Blacks are androgynous, magic-wise.” That is also no coincidence. There is practical value in being in

the middle. Specialisation only takes you so far, especially if it gets to the point of affecting the Family magic.

“Huh. Fascinating. So, wait—”

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Chapter End Notes

sorry not sorry JK you and your weird transphobic nonsense you're a grown-ass woman get a grip

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Chaos before the storm.

Chapter Notes

Warning: subtextual description of bipolar disorder. As in, if you know what to look for it you'll see it. But because it's subtextual it can sneak up on you. So yeah, just so you know. Take care of yourselves. Writing about torture and all this shit is yeah terrible, but for me at least, reading about domestic abuse and depression and bipolar and shit can hit hard. Esp if I don't catch the warning signs.

Yeah. Rambling. Take care darlings.

<3

As the date of the court case approaches, Wizarding Britain slips further and further into insanity. The Prophet alone prints four daily editions, and about a dozen new publications have sprung up, created by an enterprising magical.

It is entirely possible, Itachi thinks in the rare moment he has to himself, that somehow these people in this funny little island, are so in love with the idea of boredom, that they *want* to obsess over this petty nonsense. That, in a world of magic and wonder, the most interesting thing that has happened in decades is a public power struggle inside a Pureblood House.

"Do you think my father would have been convicted if our roles were reversed? If I wasn't a suitable enough prospect and my father remained Heir, would he get convicted?"

Nal's expression shifts into something complicated. The more Itachi learns about his guard, the more intrigued he becomes about the unorthodox way his mind works. By every metric Nal has, Itachi is a child, but that has never resulted in self-censure. He'd abstain from saying particularly harsh truths if his badgers are around, but is unfailingly honest in private.

“Interesting line of thought,” says Nal. “No, I doubt he’d see the inside of a holding cell. He could have drawn and quartered you in the Ministry’s Atrium and would have been acquitted without a problem if Lord Black wanted to make it so. On the other hand, there is an unofficial etiquette about these things. House Black would have done away with him discretely within the day. No prison but a swift and neat execution.”

Right.

“I thought as much,” he says. “Can I really be offended by the media circus, then? It’s certainly well-earned. If the country knows justice isn’t on the table, why not enjoy the theatre? It’s consequence-free drama. Watch the perversions of the rich and powerful and all that.”

“Is it free from consequence?” Kolya raises his chin a little to the side, eyes free of all judgment. “If it were, we would not be here. Investigative journalism should not result in Hitwizards protecting a child.”

Not untrue, in a normal, functional society. “Blacks aren’t people, to them, they’re abstract spirit-like beings with little connection to the real world. I”

“I do not like these excuses,” says Kolya. “They sound like victim-trauma.”

Itachi’s lips tilt in a crooked, honest line, fondness loosening some of the cynicism lodged in his heart.

“Not at all. I am simply acknowledging facts. This system is morally bankrupt because it has been deliberately built to be that way by my family and a handful of our peers. We took all the resources and land and then built a country that would allow us to keep it. The population has to be kept fully blind to very basic notions of justice and rights of citizens; otherwise, they might start getting ideas.”

Nal re-settles his shoulders, eyes sharp and fox-like. “Interesting spin. I don’t know how correct is it, though. Every country has their own system of governance, and they’re all corrupt in one way or another. Countries generate power. That is their purpose. There are some people better positioned to take advantage of that power than others.”

Mmm. “There are degrees to these things. Do you know how far the Muggles have developed their political scholarship? One need not dig through ancient tombs in search of wisdom. They need but visit a bookstore in London. Some of these writers are alive today. Lady Luxemburg died not fifty years ago. Master Foucault lives in Paris. Anyone could attend one of his lectures and learn.” He pauses, a bit taken aback at how much he means what he is saying. Huh. This has been building up, it seems. Interesting. “I have to assume that this level of wilful ignorance is a result of direct tampering.”

“Shit, kid,” sighs Nal. “What a world that would be. It’s not that I think the Purebloods are above manipulating the population, they just don’t need to. The problem is more widespread than you think. Magical folk don’t bother with things like politics, economics or philosophy. The magical world concerns itself exclusively with magic. If it doesn’t feature? We don’t do it.”

Oh, wow, there’s a thought. “Is that why you have this false conflict?” Gears click and whirr in his head. “These childish narratives of Dark magic and Light magic when the actual clash is a very standard example of class struggle?”

“Pretty much,” says Nal. “I happen to know both sides because I travel a lot and spend a decent chunk of my time in non-magical spaces, but an average witch or wizard? You couldn’t sell them the idea of collective bargaining power if you droned on for a year.”

Itachi peels his lips from his teeth in a smile lifted directly from his few encounters with Kiri. “Watch me.”

The interview with Magical’s Monthly comes about. The world ambles further into performative insanity. The ICW gets involved. Garnall is smug. His badgers are worried. Itachi just wants everything to be over.

“It could have been worse,” says Timothy, not even trying to lie all that convincingly. “What, shove off, it could have. You could have started going on about overthrowing the bourgeoisie.”

James huffs a laugh, muffled by whatever it is he’s lounging on “Or about animate transfiguration.”

“Don’t you even start, James Potter,” snaps Itachi, face slathered with a clay mask mixed with Fawkes tears. “I did the stupid interview. I smiled and let myself be photographed, and didn’t even murder anyone for looking at my brother without permission.”

Andrew’s hands don’t shake, from where he’s applying bright gold nail polish on Itachi. He’s already applied it to himself, as well as to Timothy, Noah and James. He just needs Itachi to finish the set. “You also told the interviewer that she was a pervert who should seek solace in prayer since all worldly avenues for repentance are long closed, so, y’know. There’s that.”

“She should not have asked if my conflict with Orion began as a result of my torrid affair with House Potter.” He will stand by his words. “We’re eleven. Even if we set aside the paedophilia, they should know better than to drag James into their filth.”

“I liked the bit when you called Prophet’s readers automatons without consequence who fill their ears and eyes with sensationalist drivel so they can’t hear their souls’ cries for meaning,” says James. “I really did. Nice and snappy.”

“I’m just glad the entire thing was broadcasted on WWR,” says Noah, by far the calmest one of Itachi’s clutch. “So they can’t twist it around.”

“Worthless, wretched—” Itachi inhales, mechanically regulating his heart rate. “No matter. It is done, and Aunt Dorea is not likely to ask me to give another.”

Andrew taps his wand gently on Itachi's finger-pads, to set the lacquer. "Every publication in the world will want an interview now, Siri. Magical's Monthly sells around ten thousand copies per edition. I guarantee that they will print twenty times that amount and still sell out at double the price."

James barks a short, sharp laugh. "Speaking of, what did Aunt 'Rea say? I can't imagine she was best pleased with you."

Itachi has to remove the cucumber slices over his eyes to send James an appropriately outraged look. "Your name crossed their lips, dear. Aunt Dorea congratulated me on my kind and merciful nature. I could have let her handle it, and then we'd be scattering the reporter's ashes in the wind."

James' blush is all the more concerning for how unexpected it is. He would not have thought James to be insecure about his spot in his de-facto parents' affections. It is obvious to everyone that Aunt Dorea loves nothing and no one like she does him, the rest of her family very much included.

This is not the right time for this conversation. He might be playing it down for the children but he is *blindingly* angry. It makes him a bit stupid, reckless, and very eager to start fights he will not enjoy finishing.

"It's done." Perhaps his voice isn't as even as it should be, because James' head twitches his way, eyes sharper than they need to be. He doesn't make a thing of it, just twists from his nest of cushions and starts talking about this class or that, shifting the tone of the conversation to lighthearted noise. God, what Itachi would have given the first time around, to have such well-developed intuition.

"What a mess," says Andrew under his breath. It doesn't seem like it's meant to be responded to, so Itachi hums and closes his eyes again. Tension grips him tight, squeezing his lungs. The lack of air makes him dizzy and breathless. Easy, now.

He's not wrong, is the thing. It is a mess and Itachi doesn't even know how to approach untangling it. This is the world he has, these are the cards he's dealt. If he were alone—well, if he were alone he'd have been dead a decade ago. Stupid thought. Since he's *not* alone, he needs to make this damn society a place at least somewhat worthy of Regulus. If burning it

all down and starting from scratch is the only way to make that happen, well. The Uchiha have always had a knack for fire.

Nal grabs him, ostensibly to discuss security for the trial. It doesn't quite fool anyone, but even James is happy enough to play along. The kids have seen Itachi sad and scared but they've not seen him violent.

"Should I get your brother here?" The question is clipped, but not unkind as such. "You are not fine, and I'm unhappy with your developing addiction to Calming Draughts."

"Yes," he says. Very multi-purpose word, that. "If you can do it discretely. After today, I am uneasy with anyone knowing Regulus' location."

The sheer amount of security required to hold one silly interview brought that point across in stark, neon letters. There's no accounting for chance, and it's hard to determine the threat level here. He was tempted to say that they're all putting too much stock behind impassioned letters and underground murmurs, but who even knows? It might be best to start taking this world at face value. That the threats are deranged doesn't detract from their danger.

Speaking of. "Is Calming Draught addictive? I thought Dreamless Sleep was the regulated one."

Nal's lips tighten, wand twirling through his fingers in a very ill-advised show of theatricality. "Everything is addictive if you start relying on it too much. You're on, what, two doses a day? Diluted or not, you will start feeling side effects soon. In a few years, you would have serious organ damage, and the potion manufacturers could say under a vow that it wasn't caused by their products."

Damn. "Need to step up my meditation, then."

“Lali will bring Baby Black. You just—I don’t know, honestly. I had not expected you to be this distraught. You usually ignore your bad press without flicking an eyelash.”

Distraught? He’s not distraught.

“I’m angry, Master Garnall. I’m sure everyone knows about the volatile tempers of my family. I dislike leaning into the stereotype, but every now and again—” He inhales deeply, feeling like he needs to pump oxygen into his bloodstream by the molecule. “I am eleven, no matter what titles or positions I may hold. I had honestly expected having me there in person would highlight how inappropriate all this is. What if a normal child had a sixty-year-old woman leering at them, asking about their sex life?”

“Normal child?”

Itachi cuts his hand through the air. “You know what I mean. I can parse through her motives but what if I couldn’t? What if I was just mature enough to understand the subtext, and not enough to know that her only motivation is money? What kind of damage would that do to a child?”

Nal nods a little and visibly gives himself a moment to think. “I don’t know that I’ve ever seen someone so functional dissociate this badly. That’s fucked up, kid.”

Itachi’s snort coincides with a hitch in his throat, which leaves him with a wet little coughing noise. “Gross,” he says, just to get that out of the way. “In response to your rather accurate, if incomplete remark: just because it’s me saying it doesn’t make it any less true. No, ignore that, that’s stupid. The point is that I am saying it because nobody else is. Not publicly, at least.”

“Can’t argue with that,” says Nal, looking like a man who would dearly love to argue against that, at length and with props, but is sensitive to how that will be received. “Kudos on keeping it away from the kiddies.”

“Fawkes helped some, and I try to distance myself from children when I feel my temper is running high.”

“Huh,” says Nal. “And your brother doesn’t count because?”

“I would never harm Regulus. I don’t think I would be physically capable of it.” Especially if magic, as he suspects it does, works on a subconscious level. If that assumption is correct, then the sheer number of blood-vows Itachi has sworn to Regulus over the years would strike him dead before he could think to raise a hand in anger. “No worries there, honestly.”

Nal nods, eyes a little far away as he lets the silence settle around them. That’s fair, this entire conversation was pretty pointless. Most of his conversations recently feel a lot like—therapy, maybe. He doesn’t blame the people in his life for worrying, but it’s getting a bit stressful. He’s not that ignorant, he can recognise when someone wants to talk to him and when someone just wants to check in on him or give him a chance to vent.

Whatever.

“Tachi,” calls Regulus, some ten minutes later, bounding across the room. “I missed you!”

Itachi opens his arms, not really up for talking right now. Regulus collides with his chest with the maximum force possible, which is not trivial considering Itachi is both shorter and narrower between the two.

“I can stay the night,” says Regulus into Itachi’s collarbone. “Grandfather is busy with his allies and Lady Corvi is much more likely to keep a kid alive than Grandmother is.”

He twists his head to almost ninety-degree angle to Itachi’s so it’s a struggle to keep eye contact.

“You tapped out, huh? I got you. Why don’t you and Kreacher I sit in front of the fire for a while? I’ve got just the thing. Grandfather introduced me to the art of yarn spinning. It’s apparently a very popular method for improving sensitivity and awareness of one’s magic. Super important if you want to try enchanting later—”

Regulus has to, regrettably, leave before breakfast, but the gentle evening spent in front of the fire with his family has vaporised Itachi's rage. He feels light as a feather like liquid peace runs through his veins. The phoenix tears face mask he had applied yesterday left his skin impossibly soft, his nails glitter and Kreacher brought him a new hair-care potion that smelled like sunshine. Life is good.

He meets up with his kids in the main room and sends them the brightest smile he has. "Shall we have breakfast in the Hall?"

Timothy blinks once, twice, three times, before grinning back. "Siri, my God, put that smile away before I swoon and Potter claims my scalp as his due."

"Oh pish-posh. Breakfast? Not to belabour the point, but I am starving. I'm a growing boy, Lady willing. I need my fish."

Andrew rolls over, so he's looking at them upside-down, head hanging from the side of the couch. "Oh, better believe we're going to breakfast. After your interview, this damn school will likely expect you to lick your wounds in private. I can't wait to see their reactions."

Huh. On one hand—Itachi is finally in the headspace of not caring one bit about what the school thinks. On the other—Andrew enjoys being petty when the situation allows. If he wants to make a point, then that's what they would do. Also—fish!

"Noah?"

"Huh," says Noah. "Sorry, yeah. Whatever. Breakfast, for sure. Let's, uh. Let's go."

Itachi beams, fighting the urge to throw his hands to the side and spin in circles like a lunatic. He's happy. He's bouncy. He doesn't feel a single ache or pain or twinge of discomfort. It's

like he's on holiday from normal life.

Life is good.

Little Black,

I am not often glad that someone continues to live, but your endless capacity for stirring up petty drama is unmatched by man or beast.

Do try to keep your wits about you as long as possible. I assure you the interest in your person—or blood, if all else fails—has not waned.

Greatly amused,

Marvolo

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Aftermath

His badgers insist that Itachi emerged victorious from the nightmare of an interview. Regulus and Kreacher can't be bothered one way or another and the adults in his family only care that he displayed power. Added up, yeah. Go him.

Itachi hates it.

The atmosphere in the school is more chaotic than ever. Unfortunately, when you strip away the theatrics, what's left behind is bigotry, plain and simple. Bigotry and real fear and pain, just camouflaged with clumsy language and emotionality. It's, yeah.

It's hard for him to understand. This world is so rich with peace and prosperity. There is knowledge wherever you look, starvation and murder are things to be shocked by, and people have the space to think about things like dignity and equality under the law and the rights inherent to all sentient people. You can take your time to develop an ethical framework to suit the person you want to become. You can do so much and still people are—much the same. Uninspired, unkind. Unwise.

Itachi hates it.

Many purebloods in Slytherin are firmly working class in terms of their political and economic circumstances, but they're lumped in with Shafiq and Morgan. They get all the prejudice and none of the protections. The muggleborns are treated as charity cases or foreign invaders, depending on the faction, even though they would make natural allies to the less wealthy purebloods. And they should know this. The books are *right there.* You can walk into a second-hand bookstore in any muggle city and pick up texts that would have gotten your whole clan slaughtered back home.

Itachi hates it.

As the days trickle by, the trial draws near. His companions lose their minds. James is worried; his badgers are worried; Frank, Madam Woodward, his Mind-healer, Garnall and his team are worried. Even Fawley is worried if the pointed lack of sneers and insults is anything to go by. Fawkes visits him every night and sings him to sleep, bringing with him a couple of neatly packaged lemon drops from the Headmaster. He's never bunny-less for long, if they're in their private rooms, and Kolya and Lyosha spend hours every day teaching him Russian.

Itachi hates it.

Reg is the one exception, depressingly. His brother is as uncomfortable with their fussing as Itachi is. It's easy to forget that, yes, Itachi he kept him away from the worst of it, but Reg grew up at Grimmauld. To Regulus, the idea that a child would be upset by a trial whose verdict they already bought is without reason. For a child brought up in Walbuga Black's home, this situation doesn't eclipse the baseline of stress.

"If I may have a moment, Black," says Moss, from about a meter away. Itachi pauses for a moment to admire the picture he made, standing next to Kolya and Lyosha. Physically, they could hardly be more different. The Russians look like they wrestle with dragons for sport. Moss looks like he would be most at home in the depths of the bureaucratic apparatus of a sprawling Galactic Empire. And yet, the three give off such matching disinterested energy, that they might as well be long-lost siblings.

"Merry meet, Prefect Moss," Itachi greets. "I always have time for you. How may I be of service?" Laying it on a bit thick, but Moss is about as fazed by such things as a rock.

"Excellent. The Headmaster invited you to tea. I will escort you."

"Very well. Merry part, badgers. Give my apologies to James, would you? I will be missing lunch."

“Have fun, Siri, merry part,” says Timothy, echoed by Andrew and Noah.

His team splits up, Lady Corvi remaining with the Badgers, and the twins and Garnall coming with. Juanjun is already with James, much to their mutual delight. The walk is comfortably silent—Moss is excellent at those. Itachi is already chock-full of people in his life, but if he had an empty slot, he’d grab Moss for sure. Once a week, they could meet up in the Come-and-Go room and sit in silence, relaxing their minds. They part ways at the Headmaster’s office, and Itachi is almost sad to see the boy leave.

“Fawkes,” he greets the bird that flew into him with such force, that he slid right into Garnall’s legs. “Merry meet, my friend. I missed you.”

“You bet I did. Kolya and Lyosha have been marvellous in that respect, they managed to source a non-redacted edition of Master i Margarita—”

“Oh, it’s phenomenal. No translation yet, but they’ve been so helpful—”

“Of course! You’re always welcome—”

“Mister Black,” says Madam Woodward, having apparently had enough of Itachi’s best attempt at being as obnoxious as possible in as roundabout a way as he is capable. “If you would be so kind. We have non-trivial things to discuss.”

Oh, is that so?

“I do apologise, Professor, Headmaster. Merry meet, please pardon the impropriety.”

“Not at all,” says the Headmaster. “Fawkes is, between the three of us, a far superior teacher; by virtue of age, if nothing else.”

Fawkes sends an unimpressed look Headmaster's way—which he should not be capable of, having been blessed with a non-expressive beak—and re-settles in Itachi's arms. Alright, so he's here to stay, then. Good to know.

"Thank you for that Albus," says Professor Woodward, with something of a resigned air. "Come, sit Mister Black. Master Prott, Masters Soklov, I offer you the same. Between the Headmaster, myself and the Headmaster's phoenix companion, you can afford to relax somewhat."

The Russians don't so much as twitch and Garnall inclines his head in a polite but wholly empty gesture. "We would respectfully decline."

"As you wish."

Itachi, having climbed into a seat that grows more comfortable by the visit, arranges his face into as politely inquisitive expression as he knows to make. He's—Goodness, he doesn't know what he is. Distantly curious? Unmoored? Exhausted?

"Here we are, then," says the Headmaster. He's not trying as hard to project his usual batty persona, Itachi notes. He can see visible, signs of stress in his body, in the tight lines around his eyes and the cold, bright shade to the magic "I shan't tarry. First of all, I would hear your thoughts if you would share them. Your time with us has been—extraordinary in all the ways."

Really?

"I have no complaints." Not strictly speaking true, but not *un*-true either. "I regret my attendance has brought so much strife and commotion to the school." A little true. "Hopefully, once this business is finished, I can blend into the background more." Very true.

The Headmaster hums, sharp eyes cataloguing every inch of him looking for—what? Anger? Resentment? He won't find any. As exasperating as he finds the children—and, honestly, some of the staff—he doesn't begrudge them. Itachi should never have been here. He knows it, Grandfather knows it, his badgers know it. He is the final destabilizing agent in an already

vibrating cauldron. Amaterasu only knows what will happen when the upcoming war starts adding heat to the whole thing.

“I hope it is clear you are in no way at fault for this. You are a prodigious child, but you are still a child, deserving of an education. That my school has failed you in this is a regret I will carry for some time. “

Why does all this feel like he’s being expelled?

“Nobody is at fault, Headmaster.” Best be specific here, and avoid broadening the conversation to overarching societal ills. “Other than my late father, and I feel that we should consider that matter settled, on balance. Pardon my bluntness, sir, but am I being expelled?”

A line appears between the Headmaster’s brows and his magic dims a bit. “Of course not. Whyever would you think so?”

“Oh, good.” What is all this, then? “The tone of the conversation felt a bit final, I suppose.”

“Not at all. The fact we have years still to make up for this disastrous beginning gives me comfort. I was merely concerned. My door is always open, if you want to talk, Mister Black. I cannot offer you much support, but I can offer you this.”

“You have done everything you could,” he says. Hopefully, it will stick this time. “More than I expected.”

“Very well. Moving on to the pressing issue. The trial is scheduled for this Friday, as is rather too widely known. Class is, of course, not an issue, but we thought your, ah, circumstance warrants some discussion. If you would like to spend the rest of the week at Castle Black, we will not stop you.”

“I will, of course, be present at the trial,” says Madam Woodward, before Itachi has had time to even open his mouth.

O-kay.

His patience whines as it's stretched far, far from what is comfortable. He's not at a snapping point yet, but he is getting there. Fawkes croons at him, which helps a little, but the adults tense, which brings his mood right back down.

"I would like to propose a temporary halting of formalities," he says, desperately. "I can't see another way out of this conversation."

"My boy," beams the Headmaster. "I would like nothing more!"

"Great. Thank you. So, with the caveat in mind—what's going on? Has something changed? Am I a danger to my badgers?"

Professor Woodward straightens even more, if possible. "You are no more a danger to your friends than I am," she says "The Headmaster and I thought to give you a chance to rest and prepare for the trial."

She would make a fantastic Hokage, thinks the shinobi part of him. She exemplifies the reasonable but unyielding nature of the forest better than Sarutobi ever had.

"Do I need to prepare?" Itachi asks. "I am a witness if I understood everything correctly."

Fawkes wiggles in his hold, golden beak caressing his cheek gently. A very human gesture, from such an otherworldly being. Should he reciprocate?

Yes, he should. He bends down, nuzzling his face into the soft feathers, careful to not disturb them too much. The heat of the phoenix is as comforting as it ever was, just shy of unpleasantly warm against his skin. For a Uchiha, that's as inviting as anything could be.

“I admit, I am not precisely sure how the trial itself will look like,” says the Headmaster. “I have recused myself, of course. I can, unofficially, inform you that our Ministry has reached out to the ICW to provide an impartial judge. The Wizengamot will decide in the end, but the trial itself will be conducted by the ICW.”

Itachi hums a noncommittal noise. “I notice how that is not an answer to my question. Should I expect legal repercussions?”

“I can’t see how that could happen,” says the Headmaster, the slow, careful tone being somewhat at odds with the words. “But you will be questioned, more thoroughly than I would think is appropriate.”

“Wonderful,” sighs Itachi, nuzzling right back into Fawkes. “More gawking. Sure, why not? Why not make a production about everything, always, for no reason.”

Whoops, that’s a bit too much of your inner dialogue out in the open. Dial it back, before you say something you shouldn’t.

“You do seem to invite spectacle,” says Madam Woodward, with a familiarly wry tilt of her lips and eyebrows. “The meaningless noise will pass; these things always do. Your family has rallied impressively around you, and your security team speaks of the ICW’s stance on the matter. You need not worry.”

“It pays to be immorally privileged,” says Itachi. Goodness, his tongue is running away from him isn’t it? “If only every working-class child had the resources to make sure their interests are protected.”

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“Wait, you’re leaving?”

The note of panicked alarm in Andrew’s voice brings Itachi to a standstill.

“Just until the trial,” he says, his alarm sharpening his consonants and weighing down his vowels. “Master Lee and Mistress Corvi will remain with you, of course. Do you—did something happen? I will stay if you need me to.”

“Nothing happened,” soothes Timothy, shuffling closer to Andrew until he’s practically draped over his back. “We’re perfectly fine, Siri. Please don’t worry about us at all. We just thought—”

Hmm.

“I can’t bring you with me,” he says, after a moment. “I haven’t even met your guardians in person; I have no possible way to spirit you away, even if the school let me.”

He received nominal correspondence from his badgers’ families. Meaningless chitchat, for the most part; thank you’s and you’re welcome’s, bland assurances of goodwill. He doesn’t blame them. Apart from Andrew’s sister, the two muggle families know little about what has been going on. To them, Itachi is a minor celebrity that has some bad press. Even if he knew how he’s not sure he would want to rectify that.

“Hey, no,” says Noah. “This is not about us. This trial, it’s big, yeah? We don’t even understand how big this is. If the school is giving you some time to be with your family, I think that’s the first good idea they’ve had in a while. It’s not like any of us are learning anything these days.”

“It will be nice to spend time with Regulus and Kreacher,” admits Itachi. “But if you need me, I’m sure I can negotiate with Madam Woodward to let him stay here until the trial. Say the word.”

Andrew sighs. “No, you should be with your family. Plus, y’know. Muggleborns and muggle-raised. I can’t imagine we’d be welcome at Castle Black.”

Itachi goes through a quick calming sequence—he'd actually forgotten, in the haze of drama, that he also has Pureblood nonsense to think about. "That is true. For now at least." Itachi will be Lord Black eventually. Not to mention there is the matter of a private island to think about. Sure, it's little more than a barren speck of land in the ocean right now, but Wards and houses can be built.

"So, yeah," says Timothy warmly. "Don't worry about us at all, please. Just, I don't know, take care of yourself." He pauses for a moment before his eyes widen with alarm. "And inform Potter in person, please. I can't handle him even when he's happy and indulged."

Merlin, James.

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"Of course I know you're leaving," says James, one panicked run through the Castle later. "Who do you think pestered Aunt Cassie to make it happen? I've been trying to get you out of this damn school for weeks."

Itachi sags into the hug. "Oh, thank the Lady. I was worried you would be upset."

"Why would I be upset," says James, foxy smile brimming with mischief. "I'm coming with you."

***

The fact he knows to expect her doesn't take away any of the theatricality of Lady Potter's arrival. She swans through the double doors, resplendent in off-white robes, heeled boots click-clacking over the stone. Above average height for a witch, the added height makes her appear like a warrior spirit come down from the skies to soak the earth with blood.

James is already by his side, but this time Itachi needs to make some introductions. While his own family might be unfortunate in this regard, Lady Potter is not.

“Stand, if you would,” he tells his badgers under his breath, while Aunt Dorea is exchanging stilted greetings with the staff. “James, dear, will you handle the introductions or should I?”

“I’ll handle it,” hums James. “It would be presumptuous otherwise.”

“Wait,” says Andrew in a harsh, panicked whisper. “What? You can’t just—what are you doing—”

“I’m making a statement,” says Itachi. Lady Potter is far from an insignificant player. “You won’t get an easier entry point into pureblood society and Lady Potter is, out of all the pureblood lords and ladies, most likely to play nice.” Which doesn’t mean all that much, true. A suave, well-mannered piranha is still a piranha.

“Entry—What are you talking about, you blessed maniac—”

“Easy, ‘Drew,” says Timothy. “We’ll talk about it later. Let’s just get through this for now.”

Merlin’s mercy, you lovely little lost lambs, did you think being visibly, unabashedly close to Itachi would end there? Timothy will in all likelihood have dinner-dates with Takeda-sama over the holidays. Lady Potter is the least of it.

“Merry meet, James, Sirius,” says Aunt Dorea, inclining her head just so.

“Merry meet, Aunt ‘Rea,” says James, echoed by Itachi’s “Merry meet, Lady Potter.” An extra level of formality won’t harm him here, especially after all the extravagant gift-giving.

“If I may,” continues James without a hitch. “I would introduce some of my dear friends.”

Aunt Dorea's eyes sparkle with wicked humour, but her face remains as distant and unknowable as ever. "Go on."

"Wonderful. Alright, Aunt 'Rea, please meet Timothy Warnock, Andrew Clarke and Noah Young, from Hufflepuff. Badgers, my Aunt, Lady Dorea Potter nee Black."

This time even Noah is drawn into parroting the pureblood customs. All three of his badgers fall into clumsy bows, Noah mangling it most, and Andrew almost managing to guess the correct posture. "Merry meet, Lady Potter," they chorus, the few seconds of delay between each other only making the picture more charming.

"Merry meet, Master Warnock, Master Clarke, Master Young," says Aunt Dorea, somewhat to Itachi's shock. That's a rising endorsement if ever he heard one and from a Black witch no less. "You are Sirius' classmates, I would wager?"

"Yes, uh, my lady?" Timothy's voice twists into a question at the end, but his innate curiosity helps keep him composed. "We shared a dorm in the Hufflepuff dormitories before, and now we stay with Siri—uh, sorry, Sirius—in the separate rooms."

"I see," she says. "I commend your loyalty. The Sorting Hat did you justice."

"Siri, as well." Noah realises what he has done, blushes furiously, and ducks his head to hide. "Um. I mean Sirius, uh, Lady Potter. The Sorting Hat didn't make a mistake with him, either."

"Thank you, dear," Itachi says, touched. "That is very kind."

"Indeed," agrees Aunt Dorea, lips tilted ever-so-slightly sideways into an imperious little smile. "The family knew Sirius was heading to the House of the Loyal for years, that was certainly no surprise. That he had found faithful companions, was. It was a pleasure to meet you. Merry part. Come along, nephews."

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Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Bellatrix

(Tuesday, October 5th 1971)

"Against all odds, I must conclude you look well," says Grandfather, as they're sitting down for dinner. It's a comparatively casual meal, tucked away in Grandfather's study instead of the formal dining room. "The news out of Hogwarts got progressively worse. Even Cassie sent me pointed letters."

Itachi stabs his steak with more force than necessary. "It's a mess," he says. "They don't even pretend to be an educational institution anymore. It's just gossip and pranks and a collective waste of time."

"We will see if something can be done after the trial. Worst comes to worst, you can test out of a few grades. We can't pull you out yet, but skipping grades is a fair compromise."

And we circle back to the trial, again. "Should I be worried? I am being handled, and I don't appreciate it. Am I a witness or a suspect?"

Arcturus sighs. "Let's not pretend this trial has anything to do with justice. It's politics, grandson. There are many ways to benefit from House Black losing power. Certainly more than the reverse."

Tedious. This is all so *tedious.*

“We have two days to prepare,” continues Arcturus once it’s clear Itachi is sulking and Regulus is plotting. “Walburga has been made irrelevant by Orion’s death. Even if a miracle happens and she’s acquitted, I can let Family Magic do what I am stopping it from doing. This trial is about you. Our opponents will focus on destroying your political career before it even begins.”

“Charming. Reg—thoughts?”

“Me, oh, um. Well, I agree that everybody will be focused on you but I don’t see why you would stress about it. You’re not in danger, you did nothing wrong. You have connections no eleven-year-old should and are well on your way to building more. This is all just—fluff.”

“Politics is an accumulative game,” says Arcturus. He puts down his cutlery, and leans forward, like he means business, but regrets that it is necessary. “It will take a hundred people to kill either one of you and only one person to hold the wand. You live or die based on your connections, especially now that we’re on the cusp of civil war. You cannot afford to think yourself above it all.”

“It is disorienting,” Itachi says. “I am a school child and a political figure. I get assigned detention if I am not courteous to a classmate, but I am also the subject of a pseudo-trial, where I need to defend my reputation. A reputation, mind you, that no child my age should have.”

James doesn’t have a reputation. *Heir Malfoy* doesn’t have a reputation, and he’s ten years older than Itachi is, an adult building his career.

“None of this is fair or good or just, Sirius.” Grandfather doesn’t try to hide the way his shoulders curve inwards, posture losing a lot of the Pureblood polish. “We’re past that. You are smart boys, you can run, still. Maybe there is a corner of the world where the bounty hunters won’t find you. But if you want to stay here and live, you have to play the game and mean it.”

(Wednesday, October 6th 1971)

The plan, such as it is, is somewhat anticlimactic. Regulus argued successfully that, if Itachi is their main asset, taking care of him is important. To that end, Wednesday morning goes by in a swirl of indulgence and goodwill. Reg is there; Kreacher is there; James is there; Garnall and the Russians are there. Everybody invests real effort in keeping their voices soft when speaking to and around Itachi, and his overwhelmed, neurotic mind appreciates every second.

In contrast, the evening is dedicated to building alliances. The first on a very long list of *Adults Itachi Needs To Charm* are Lord Cygnus Black, his wife Lady Druella Black nee Rosier, the LeStrange brothers and Bellatrix LeStrange nee Black. To balance things out, Grandfather invited the Potters and Aunt Cassie to be token Lady Black in Lady Melania's absence.

A mess, all in all. The dinner will be a nightmare of tension. Bellatrix LeStrange was marched to her wedding at wand point, as Regulus had informed him. That she ended up a Lady of a wealthy, Sacred Twenty-Eight House only upped the stakes of the upcoming drama.

Aunt Dora is the first to arrive, accompanied by her husband and nephew. Whatever the plan is, Dorea planned for hostility, if her sartorial choices were any indication. Aunt Dorea and Lord Potter wear traditional robes in heavy coppers and browns. James endures his matching outfit with considerably less grace. The stiff layers and heavy fabrics are hardly forgiving; woe betide anyone who would think to put Itachi or Regulus in such. Immoral wealth comes with some social bargaining power; the Black brothers create the standard by which they are to be judged, at least when it comes to fashion.

Itachi and Reg went with their tried method of emphasising their likeness. Reg is taller, amusingly, but he has rounder features, like a child his age should have. Their robes are snazzy, modern cuts with wide sleeves that end just above the wrist, made out of a lightweight grey linen, with subtle black accents. Offhand opulence is the goal, and he thinks they hit the mark quite well. Especially considering the sheer weight of jewellery that Regulus had foisted onto Itachi.

They barely have time to exchange procedural greetings before the floo lights again. Itachi blinks. Well, well. The LeStrange family is certainly unorthodox. Bellatrix LeStrange nee Black is the first one to floo over, and Itachi spends a long moment admiring her walk. Whoever taught this young woman to be dangerous certainly knew their business. Her articulation is a bit on the nose, perhaps, but the confidence is real, unburdened with bravado.

Her robes are tailored for a duel, not to flatter her shape which, combined with her posture, implies that Lady LeStrange, for some reason, does not want to play that card. Interesting. Unwise and immature, but interesting.

Lord and Heir LeStrange come through next, and they quite pale in comparison. Certainly, they are blessed with the same phenotypical standard that the Purebloods have worked hard to obtain, tall and pointy, wide shoulders and narrow waists. Still, for all that they are doubtlessly powerful, lethal men when they want to be, they seem to lack—motivation. He can't know if they're dull, not without having spoken to them, but the glint of intelligence, curiosity and drive is conspicuously absent.

Finally, right at their heels come Cygnus Black and Druella Black nee Rosier. Itachi wasn't expecting much from them and got even less. The one thing to note is that Cygnus Black either doesn't have the skill to hide his dislike of Itachi or doesn't care enough to try. Active dislike, too. His attention is fully on Itachi, sneer thinning his lips, so much so that he misses the non-trivial level of hatred his daughter directs his way.

What a mess. The protocol is clear, at least, and that buys him some time to wrestle his impatience into submission. The guests greet Arcturus, who then gives Itachi and Regulus the go-ahead to greet their guests back. It takes a good five minutes, and Itachi is already exhausted.

The seating arrangement is amusing. Grandfather, in a rare show of interpersonal sensitivity, chose a square table, and not a typically rectangular one. The Potters take one side, the LeStranges take another, Cygnus and Druella sit on the third side, and the main Black line—Grandfather, Aunt Cassie, Itachi and Regulus—take the fourth

Druella Black doesn't give a damn about any of the people present. The brittle, blonde beauty stared through the lot of them without so much as expanding the effort to be subtle about it. It's messy in a new and exhausting way. Itachi was supposed to sit next to Grandfather on his left, which would place him closer to the Potters. Since Grandfather is well aware that Itachi would have Feelings about his baby brother sitting next to Rabastan LeStrange, he immediately places Itachi on the corner seat, closest to LeStranges.

The adults parcel off into meaningless chitchat, Cygnus with Arcturus, Aunt Cassie with Dorea and Regulus with Lord Potter. This left Itachi with some energy, and not a lot of motivation to talk about school.

“Lovely set of knives, Lady LeStrange,” he says. “The magic around them is quite thick; enchanted or cursed?”

Bellatrix Black’s eyes are technically the same stormy grey as his or Regulus’ are. They don’t look alike in the least, despite that. She is all passion, magic never settling, always in movement. “Well spotted, cousin. They are a gift, from my brother.”

That would be Heir LeStrange? Rabastan?

“Fantastic choice,” he says to the quiet man sitting next to him. “Regulus and I haven’t yet found a rule that would let us bring such instruments to Hogwarts, but I am cautiously optimistic that I can give some to Garnall to hold onto for me.”

“They’re ritual knives.” Itachi doesn’t read hostility in the man, but something is off. The pauses between words are a beat too long, and the pronunciation too careful, like speaking is a performance he is not very comfortable with. “You have...little use for them.”

“A weapon is never the one thing, cousin,” he says, pitching his voice in a way that suggests a reply would be welcome but not necessary.

Indeed Heir LeStrange inclines his head but doesn’t comment.

“Are you specialising in ritual casting, Lady LeStrange?” Now they’re getting somewhere. “Very aspirational. I plan on specialising in Rune work, which would make us cousin-colleagues, in a sense. I would love to learn from you if you stumble onto some free time in this chaos.”

Lady LeStrange peels her lips from her teeth in an amusingly affable snarl. “I specialise in battle-magic. Rituals are a necessary addition.”

Itachi’s eyes sharpen. “Battle magic? You don’t say. Tell me, my Lady, how open would you be to bribes? I have done what I can with self-study, but Hogwarts is somewhat hostile to such pursuits.”

“You have nothing to bribe me with, cousin,” she says. “I don’t lack in funds, and altruism isn’t a motivating force.”

He theatrically cuts his eyes to Cygnus, who is ignoring them so forcefully that it’s a bit embarrassing. His wife certainly thinks so, because she periodically turns to him to spear him with a look of such studied derision, Itachi can’t help but admire her a little despite everything. “Oh, I don’t know, Lady LeStrange. I think I have better access to some things than you do, at the moment. But that is not what I have meant, per se. Are you in an official apprenticeship?”

She tosses her hair, eyes losing some of the wild, omnidirectional chaos as she focuses on him. Huh. She thinks it’s an insult? A taunt?

“Who would be worthy of me,” she throws out, very much like an opening strike. “I am already better than the sorry lot Britain has on offer.”

“Lord Riddle,” he says, not bothering with the typical back and forth. He’s famously eccentric, he can afford to be blunt. “I do not doubt your prowess at all, my Lady, but Lord Riddle is better.”

She pauses, scanning him from head to foot, not having expected a serious answer. Understandable. Itachi can only guess at all the nonsense the woman had to swallow, with a disinterested Lord and a pathetic, spiteful worm of a father. “Yes, he is better.”

“As it happens, Lord Riddle finds me amusing, possibly because I don’t lie to him. I do not know if he would agree to accept you as an apprentice, but he will hear you out. He’s certainly the most dangerous man in this disaster of an island.”

“Do you know why he is powerful,” she asks, talking a little slowly, but without the edge of immediate violence. “He is powerful because nobody can tell him what to do. Certainly not you, cousin.”

“My dear Lady,” he says, amusement tickling his vowels. “I would never attempt to tell Lord Riddle what to do, lest he decide to indulge his nature and murder everyone and everything. I would ask, very politely, if he would meet with my cousin, a witch with potent magic and bloodlust so thick it’s practically sparking off her lovely curls.”

He pauses for a bit, considering. This is a bit abrupt but Bellatrix LeStrange despises the Blacks. If he can get her on his side at least a little, it will be worth it. Plus, he doesn’t like to see talent wasted, and Lady LeStrange would be right at home in Kiri.

“I would be surprised if he was unreasonable about this. You are a prize, Lady LeStrange, and as much as a misanthrope Lord Riddle is, he is not blind.” He might be a killer by nature, but nothing Itachi has seen suggests that he is categorically opposed to the political approach first.

“Because you want me to teach you battle magic?”

Hmm. Well, he’s made honestly something of a defining trait, hasn’t he? He certainly doesn’t understand these humans enough to try and manipulate them, even if Bellatrix Black is the closest thing he’s found to a Shinobi since, in fact, Riddle.

“I lost the first serious conflict I got into. I do not need to explain how demoralizing it is to have been defeated by an individual so unimpressive as Orion Black.”

“Did you lose, cousin? You are alive, powerful and rich. He is dead and will be remembered as the Wizard who got killed by an eleven-year-old.”

What a horrible thing to say to a child. Then again, the child is asking for lessons in battle magic.

“Pure chance,” he says. “I allowed myself to be in the position where the only option left was to stab my opponent with my wand. Luck is not something that I am comfortable with. My luck, especially”

The Lady nods a sharp, deliberately masculine gesture. Huh, battle magic, was it? Blacks may be androgynous as a rule, but perhaps Lady LeStrange leans a bit further into the masculine than her body would suggest. Interesting.

Cygnus chooses the absolute worst time to insert himself into the conversation. Well, worst for him. Itachi has something of a point to make, so the cretin has opened a fine avenue. “Waste of time. Riddle has no use for women or children. Your delusions are dangerous, and someone should do something to curb them before you get yourself hurt. Again.”

Itachi blinks, slow and unhurried. From the corner of his eye, he sees Regulus tense, but he continues his amiable chat with Lord Potter with only the barest hitch in his voice. James, on the other hand, lets his lips tilt in a thin, cruel smile.

“Lord Riddle has a use for things that are useful, Master Black. I am not surprised you have not learned this about him.”

Grandfather’s sigh is quiet but not displeased, fully prepared to ignore the outraged look Cygnus sends his way. Aunt Dorea doesn’t acknowledge the interaction in any way, but Aunt Cassie’s smirk is loud.

“As I was saying—”

“You need to learn respect, boy.” To his credit, Cygnus’ tone isn’t outwardly aggressive. He speaks in a manner that would be appropriate for a guardian. A terrible guardian, but it’s clear that either Cygnus forgot Itachi is not one of the children he can slap around, or he can’t quite imagine that the category even exists.

“You are, perhaps, confusing my lack of interest in anything you have to say with bravado or aggression. Whatever the case may be, unlike you, I am very aware of who I am beholden to. Best believe you are not on that very short list.”

“And what might that list be,” says Bellatrix, for the first time looking like something close to happy.

“Regulus,” he says without pause. “Lord Black. Lord Riddle in a distant, self-preserving way. To an extent, the Headmaster.” He pauses, thinking. “Aunt Cassie, because she is terrifying. James because he is James, and Aunt Dorea, again, because of James.” Is there anything else? “My security team, because I owe them a debt. That’s about it, I think.”

“Very flattering, Grandson,” says Grandfather, before Cygnus can raise whatever fool objections he can think of about Itachi’s priorities. “Now, if we could all remember that sniping over food is gauche, that would be appreciated. Cygnus, you were telling me about the investments in the Egyptian properties—”

“There is no Mastery in Runes,” says, Lord LeStrange, quite unexpectedly. “Runes are a method, not a field. You would need to specialize in something; warding, enchanting, curse-breaking.”

“What would you recommend, Lord LeStrange?”

The man’s eyebrows arch into an exasperated line. “Call me Rodolphus. We’re family, or near as. The other two as well, even if they wouldn’t think to mention it. I would say that you need to focus on Magical Theory and Arithmancy for now. Rab can recommend some texts; not really my field.”

“And what is your field—” He can’t say it. Names are left to closest family and friends. “Uh, cousin-in-law?”

Lord LeStrange barks a short, sharp burst of laughter. Maybe rumbles? His voice is certainly deep enough for his laugh to sound like boulders rolling downhill. “Cousin will do. Not good

with names, eh? Had a similar problem, when I was your age. Damn tutors carve the titles into our minds, and then expect us to drop them, just like that."

Well, that's not strictly speaking true, in his case, but he will hardly get into the discussion about intimacy here. "Thank you for your understanding, cousin. As for my question?"

"Pushy little thing," he grins. "I am an enchanter, by trade."

"He makes pretty things, and then curses them horribly," translates Lady LeStrange. "And he's right. I haven't thought to find an interesting cousin, but that was, perhaps, shortsighted of me. Call me Bella."

"Thank you, Cousin Rodolphus, Cousin Bella." It's easier with her.

"Cousin, too," says Rabastan. "Drop the… Heir as soon you… can. Things are tedious… enough as is."

"The reverse is, of course, true. Thank you." Ugh, he may as well work on dropping the title. The word 'cousin' is starting to lose all meaning. "Are you an enchanter as well?"

"Yes," says Rabastan, but doesn't elaborate.

"Rab makes armour," says Rodolphus, with so much casual disinterest that Itachi's decomposing corpse would know this is a sensitive topic.

Well, tough. "You don't say," he breathes, turning his entire body towards the man. "Enchanted armour? Protective rune-work? Where did you specialise?" Can't have been Britain. "Russia? India?"

"Japan."

Okay, okay, calm down. You can see the man doesn't enjoy talking. It's counterproductive to annoy him if you want to pick his brain.

"Any texts you could recommend would be *greatly* appreciated, cousin." This isn't casual, Itachi, come on. "I am wandering aimlessly through the field; my productivity is approaching zero."

"Awww," coos Bellatrix. "Baby cousin has his favourite. Are you sure you want me to teach you? Seems like your interests lie elsewhere."

"No offence, cousin Bella, but battle magic is necessary, not enjoyable. Warding and enchanting, however, are *fascinating*."

"Yes," says Rabastan, in a wonderful matter-of-fact tone that works well with how sour Cygnus becomes with each word out of Itachi's mouth. "Rodolphus is correct. Arithmancy… and Magical Theory…to start. I will send…you books."

"Perfect," he says and means it.

"What was that, grandson," says Arcturus, once the guests had left, and it's just the three of them, Garnall guarding the doors, Kolya and Lyosha patrolling the castle, and Kreacher in the shadows. "Why antagonise Cygnus? He is the head of his line."

Regulus snorts, burrowing further into Itachi's side.

"Many reasons," Itachi says. "Most of them have to do with the appalling way he is shaming his daughters. Marriage straight after Hogwarts without a career or even a Mastery is an appalling slight."

“Plus there was the whole ‘Andromeda’ affair,” says Regulus. He twists Itachi’s way, a familiar glint of gossip in his eyes. “I found out, by the by. Bellatrix is the middle daughter. The oldest, Andromeda, ran away when she was betrothed to Lucius Malfoy, hence the hasty marriages. The old frog didn’t want to risk his daughters escaping.”

“Lucius Malfoy?” Good grief. “Narcissa’s betrothed?”

“Heir Yaxley asked for Narcissa, and Cygnus saw the opportunity to get three Heirs, instead of two. Since Narcissa’s, ah, *friendship* with Malfoy was unofficial, he agreed and offered Andromeda to the Malfoys instead. It was quite a scandal, Grandmother assures me.”

Itachi is—honestly both disgusted and pleasantly surprised. “Good on her,” he says. “She saved everybody quite a bit of heartache.”

“Cygnus petitioned me to disinherit her magically, not just legally,” says Arcturus. “I refused, of course. Andromeda was a fine Slytherin, Prefect and Head Girl, got herself a healing Mastery in France. There is no need for drastic measures when she was very careful to distance herself from the family.”

“She married a muggleborn,” says Regulus under his breath. “Took his name, tied her magic to his. Whatever shame she might or might not bring, it will be on Tonks’s name, not Black.”

“There you have it,” says Itachi, sending a look Grandfather’s way. “He’s a miserable, short-sighted bigot, bartering his daughters like chattel. He embodies every stereotype about Dark Purebloods, Grandfather, and I’ve spent too much time rehabilitating our image to have him ruin my work with his nonsense.”

“Plus Lord and Lady LeStrange despise him,” adds Regulus with a calm little smile. “Heir LeStrange as well. He is outdated, Grandfather. He looks down on Siri just because he’s young. That’s just bad reasoning.”

“Taking children seriously is difficult,” says Arcturus. “My lessons in this arena did not come cheap, and Cygnus is not as motivated a student as I was. Still, even though you’ve alienated Cygnus, you managed miracles with House LeStrange, so I shan’t begrudge you. Regulus, I enjoyed listening to your discussion with the Potters. That is another unlikely alliance, and yet is proving to be remarkably fruitful.”

“Uncle Charlus, as he instructed I should call him, is a kind man,” says Regulus. “He wants to like me; he liked me before he’d met me. I didn’t have to work hard, there.”

“LeStranges are our allies, are they not?”

Arcturus hums, implying he will start rubbing his temples soon with how tired he is. “Nominally. The previous Lord was a contemporary of mine. A charismatic, utterly insane battle mage. He swore himself to Grindelwald and got cursed. The infirmity destroyed what little sense he had. Both of his sons were betrothed to babes on the back of his gambling addiction.”

“Oh, I know this,” says Regulus. “Bellatrix, as we know, and Heiress Travers?”

“Yes. The Travers girl died of dragon pox when she was a babe, but Rodolphus married Bellatrix.”

Pureblood marriage is not about love, of course, nobody is naive to suggest such a thing. Still, there is a minimum degree of compatibility that is expected. Rodolphus LeStrange is the furthest thing from interested in women if he has any interest in such things at all. Either party should have had a right of refusal, upon reaching majority.

“On the whole, I think we did well, Grandfather.” True. “I doubt you were honestly expecting me to get along with a wizard whose only claim to worth is that he was born into nobility.”

“I’d trade him for Andromeda,” adds Regulus. “She showed more cunning and ambition when she was seventeen than he ever did. He is known to be cruel to his own family, and that is not something our allies would appreciate.”

Arcturus closes his eyes, slumping a little in his chair. Still, for all the performative exasperation, there is a small smile playing around his lips. “Lady love me,” he says. “That is not a priority right now. Narcissa is by all accounts perfectly content with her betrothal. Bellatrix is already bonded with Lord LeStrange. We will deal with Andromeda later.”

“Fair enough. So, Uncle Alphard tomorrow, then?”

“For my sins, yes. At least I can count on his catamite to keep you distracted. Cassie and Dorea likely won’t be there, unless you need them specifically. Lycoris and Regulus—one of the many bearers of the name, grandson—would come, but they live quiet lives abroad, so they don’t have much sway. Perhaps another House?”

“Dark?”

“Preferably, with Alphard there. My brother is many things, but politically savvy is not one of them.”

“Malfoys are always a safe bet,” he throws out, not invested even a little. “Notts, Rosiers, Flints. A Dark-leaning Neutral House could work. House Morgan’s Heir is a classmate of mine and something of an ally. I’m likewise acquainted with Heiress Shafiq.”

“The Neutrals are out,” says Grandfather after a moment’s deliberation. “It would be impolite to give them such a short timeframe. Rosiers would be appropriate—we are fairly well aligned, without feuds or marriages to balance the scales any which way.”

Hmm. “Lord Rosier would be a young Wizard with silver hair and eyes who looks at Lord Riddle like he is the Moon’s favoured son?”

Grandfather’s sigh blends well with Reg’s tinkling laughter. “Yes, Sirius, that would be correct, broadly speaking.”

“Then maybe not,” he says. “I’ve made no secret of my respect for Lord Riddle. I feel like young Lord Rosier might misinterpret my goals to not get murdered by the man as something more, and would take offence. I am, after all, just a child.”

“Good thinking, Siri,” says Reg, without a drop of sarcasm. “Say what you will about Hogwarts, but it’s done wonders for your grasp on empathy.”

Darling bunny.

“House Malfoy, then,” says Grandfather, in the forceful tones of an old man not in the least willing to talk about a somewhat uncomfortable topic unless he has to. “Lord and Lady Malfoy, and their Heir. That sounds appropriate.”

“Oh, very,” smiles Reg. “Plus, Siri has some Patronus points to spend with Lord Daigo, which will be fun to rub in the Malfoys’ faces.”

Yeah, fun. So fun. Yay.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Thursday, 7 th October 1971)

They don't get much time to prepare for the next 'event'. The fact it is in their home helps not at all. On one hand, Itachi doesn't quite see why he should need to prepare at all, considering it's a *dinner*. On the other hand, he's absolutely panicking because, heavens wept, but he feels unprepared.

"What do we know about the Malfoys?"

"Noble and Ancient House," recites Regulus, for the umpteenth time. "Mordred's line, cursed to have only one child in the main line. Extraordinarily wealthy. Lord Abraxas Malfoy is Riddle's. Lady Sofía Antonietta Malfoy nee Lara is of Spanish aristocracy, the firstborn daughter of Lord Lara. She is, by all accounts, the closest you will come to a kindhearted witch among the Sacred Twenty-Eight. Heir Lucius is currently working towards a Mastery in Magical History. Engaged to Narcissa, obviously."

Izanami wept. "And we're having them over with—Uncle Alphard? With *Daigo-sama*?"

"You will need them, 'Tachi," says Regulus, voice saturated with faux exasperation. "The Malfoys are rich, ruthless and well-connected."

Also, Riddles's, which makes them more valuable, not less. If Itachi's plans to make House Black the English analogue to the ever-neutral Land of Iron, making the leaders happy will not be enough. Leaders come and go, but the community stays.

"True." What to do about it isn't any clearer, however. "Do we even have a plan?"

Regulus makes a dissatisfied sound. “Not even a little. I don’t imagine we *can* do a lot, even if we wanted to. It’s one dinner, and making friends with Lord Daigo is, if anything, more pressing at this time.”

Right. “Garnall? Any words of wisdom?”

Garnall, lurking by the fireplace under a discrete perception filter, notches his eyebrows. “Not a one. This isn’t my sphere. If I had to venture a guess, I’d say your brother is right. It’s a dinner where the outcome is already more or less settled. I wouldn’t stress.”

Oh, you wouldn’t, would you? Have you *seen* Daigo-sama?

“Right.”

“Not to worry, ‘Tachi,” coos Regulus. “If worst comes to worst, you can always get your Patronus to entertain your crush—”

Itachi rolls his eyes and slouches in his chair. A crush, he says. Itachi’s body is young. He can’t be blamed for how it freaks out when faced with peerless grace. “He is nothing of the sort. Daigo-sama is a happily married man, to our Great-Uncle, even.”

“Oh? What is this?” Of course Garnall jumped at the tidbit. “Baby Black, this is the first I hear about this.”

For Lady’s sake. “Regulus is exaggerating,” he says in an overdone simper. “Also, have you met Daigo-sama, by any chance?”

“I haven’t had the pleasure, no,” grins Garnall.

“In that case, I look forward to watching you forget you were ever a being capable of walking and breathing at the same time.”

“Now *you’re* exaggerating,” says Regulus, and shifts to send Garnall an impish look. “But not by much. Lord Daigo is exceptionally beautiful, wilful and dangerous.”

“He wore a purple robe edged with dark orange,” adds Itachi helpfully. “Do you know how much power you need to have to survive wearing deep purple combined with ōtan orange while flaunting the pirate lover you refused to marry for over a decade?”

“No, I don’t,” says Garnall, eyes dancing. “How much?”

Itachi bares his teeth in a smile. “Enough to be untouchable. I don’t know if he is too strong or too valuable to eliminate, but it’s likely, a combination of the two. And I need him to agree to talk to Timothy’s parents.”

Regulus’ smile grows even more entertained. “Maybe leave that topic for another night, ‘Tachi. He already doesn’t know what to make of you.”

Yes, and then more time will pass, while his badgers’ homes languish unsecured. “You’re not wrong.” Unfortunately.

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Malfoys arrive first, which is a stroke of good fortune. Regulus is not wrong about Itachi’s embarrassing reactions to Daigo-sama’s everything, and he’s never really spoken to Lord or Lady Malfoy, much less Heir Lucius Malfoy.

They present themselves beautifully, he will freely admit. Blond, tall and arrogant to the bone. Lady Malfoy nee Lara stands out, as most of the witches in his acquaintance do. She might have allowed family magic to change her hair and eyes to Malfoy-blond, but her complexion remains an olive-tinged gold. How or why the Lady kept her warmth is anyone’s guess, but Itachi is touched by it. Kindness is a cardinal sin among any aristocratic class that Itachi knew. That she flaunts it is as brazen as Orochimaru-sama’s scents and impractical robes had been, back when.

Her husband and son are—Itachi's eyes glaze over a little. He doesn't doubt they are fine members of their species, it's just—predictable, is all. Beautiful, cold, arrogant, brimming with confidence, Itachi has seen that particular set-up time and time again. The only slightly interesting thing about them is their shared adoration of Lady Malfoy and disinterest in Itachi. They're polite about it, to be sure, but it's clear they have no use for a child, as well-connected as he may be.

Refreshing, he has to say. Itachi can do with more apathetic adults in his life. Lady Malfoy—clearly the soul of any room she's in—takes great care to speak to them gently. She inquires about Itachi's classes and Reg's projects, laughs gently at their admiration of Aunt Cassie and nods approvingly at Itachi's connections among the Pureblood Heirs in Hogwarts.

"Dorea speaks highly of you," she says, charmingly hoarse voice light with amusement. "You are close to her Heir, are you not?"

Itachi lets his lips soften into a less scripted curve. "James is a treasure. He has been a friend without compare."

"So we heard," she replies, flashing her dimples with devastating effect. "Something about sunberries and a herd of abraxan?"

Itachi makes his shrug indulgent. "I am not fond of ambiguity. All my people are precious to me. Why wouldn't I make that abundantly clear? Plus—" He shifts slightly, sending a meaningful look Reg's way. "My brother organised the bulk of it. Sadly, most of my days go by in a cloud of tedium."

"At least you won't have to do any more interviews," Reg answers, playing up his impishness beautifully. "Not after last time."

That's true.

“I wouldn’t be so certain,” Lady Malfoy says. “Most everyone I know enjoyed listening to it and the fallout will be even more amusing.”

“I imagine the trial will provide the public with plenty of amusing soundbites,” Grandfather says lightly. Itachi appreciates that he stuck with the easygoing tone. This is not the place for any substantive conversations. “Explaining the value of discretion to Sirius has proven to be an impossible task.”

“Indeed,” Lord Malfoy says, with a wonderfully sardonic edge that Itachi loves. “Heir Black stands out. House Black is known to produce unfailingly even tempers.”

Grandfather inclines his head, playing it completely straight. “Precisely.”

***

Uncle Alphard and Daigo-sama arrive five minutes before dinner is set to begin and shatter the peaceful atmosphere irreparably.

Itachi doesn’t know where to look. Uncle Alphard is Uncle Alphard, wearing a bizarre outfit made out of bits and pieces of clothing kept together with straps and patches, every single scrap of it brimming with magic. He wears more enchantments in his hair-ornaments than most people acquire over their whole lives.

Daigo-sama, in contrast, wears all seven layers of a formal outfit in heavily embroidered indigo. Itachi doesn’t know much about fashion, but he likes his creature comforts, which means he recognises ritually woven fabrics. Grandfather sourced them something similar for their Presentations, and they only used one layer of it. Daigo-sama wears seven, each one embroidered with runes. Every piece Daigo-sama wears is a Mastery-level project, to say nothing of how unspeakably expensive it is. And he wears it for dinner.

He shares an alarmed—and, yes, flustered—look with Regulus. This is a statement. An incomprehensible statement, but a statement nonetheless.

“Heir Black,” Daigo-sama says, after exchanging vaguely disinterested greetings with the adults. “Please accept a small token of our regard.”

Itachi doesn’t stumble over his words, but he does duck his head a bit too much to make sure he has his face under control. It’s a lot. He’s at least somewhat vindicated by Garnall’s stunned look. Oh, you poor fool; did you think Itachi was playing games?

The deceptively unassuming flower encased in a jade pot is something to be wary of. If you stumbled across it on a field, you wouldn't have been able to tell the difference between it and a mundane mallow flower—if you couldn’t feel the magic, that is. Much like the sunberries filled you with euphoria, the drab little flower imbued you with clarity. Just being around it made him want to spend a couple of hundred years in peaceful contemplation. Preferably on top of a mountain with a lot of fireflies.

“I—” His hands feel like they might never let go of the stone pot. “This one is unworthy.” He inclines his head, the pot preventing him from falling into the habits of his former life and going for a full formal bow.

“Not so,” Daigo-sama says, tone still flowing in a scripted, ritualistic cadence. “Great honour is owed to those worthy of the Heavens’ favour. Offering such is our humble privilege.”

Ugh. Heavens’ favour. This is all going pear-shaped, and Itachi can’t for the life of him figure out a way out that won’t end in tears. If he had a proper set of Sharingan eyes, they’d be in business. His Susanō at his peak would have been—

Never mind that. There are other people here. At least his blush made him look star-struck and not stalling for something to say that wouldn’t be a blasphemous lie. “Daigo-sama is generous, as befits his line. This one will strive not to disappoint.”

The baffled stares of his family are easier to withstand than those coming from the Malfoys. This is all a bit much, yes, but Itachi has a paradise-plant in his hands that is making him a bit wobbly. He hasn’t yet had the mental wherewithal to consider the overlap between his first life and this one, which is glaringly obvious when it comes to East Asian cultures. It’s not a duplicate, but they mirror each other in too many ways to be a coincidence. Itachi has been a Uchiha far more than a Black in recent years, which complicates things even further. He can’t even resent the headache caused by see-sawing between the sides of his personality, because

he should have better control over himself than this. Is it nostalgia? Does he miss his first life so much, that he latches onto familiar modes of speech and dress? He doesn't know and he *really should.*

Daigo-sama's eyes gleam unknowably. Whatever he sees in Itachi's unconscious projections of Uchiha-manners, he thinks it fascinating. "I very much doubt Heir Black is capable of such."

Ugh. Let's move this along, shall we?

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Ignoring Lord, Lady and Heir Malfoy is blessedly straightforward because Grandfather makes sure to rope them and Uncle Alphard into a discussion about the trial that Itachi can't follow to save his life. Not when he has Daigo-sama's undivided attention.

Reg jumps in where he can, but he can't grasp the subtext flowing between Daigo-sama and Itachi. Even Uncle Alphard, Itachi thinks, can't pick up on most of it.

Itachi feels his eyes prickle, as they always do when he subconsciously wants to flash his Sharingan. It would have been appropriate, back then, provided he was among family. That's but one of the differences. Daigo-sama acts almost, but not quite as Itachi expects. Nine-tenths of his script has been drilled into every clan child in the Elemental Nations for centuries, but the last tenth is what's causing trouble. Itachi can't place every idiom, and Daigo-sama doesn't recognise some of his. It only serves to make the exchange more thrilling, since there is enough scaffolding there for him to guess what's missing. Itachi might not know why the snake needs to spend a thousand years in the ocean, but the comment about dotting the eyes of a dragon was delightful. He replied with a quip his Great-uncle Kagami was fond of, which netted him a genuine laugh; a prize to be savoured.

It is very lovely and Itachi hates there is so much nonsense weighing down what could be a fairly uncomplicated dinner. Worse, it's making him sharper than he usually is. Being Sirius Black has relaxed him in a million different ways. Blacks are a pack of clumsy kittens compared to the Uchiha in their heyday. Even past their heyday, honestly. Putting on parts of that personality invariably drags up other, less pleasant aspects. He feels himself step further

and further towards the cool, untouchable tones of a clan-raised jōnin, trained to kill from before he could walk. He's not there yet, but he's hardly playing a filial schoolboy, either.

The colder he grows, the more pleased—and respectful—Daigo-sama becomes, until Itachi finds himself noticing the jarring lack of fūinjutsu on his body and chakra in his blood. Alright, time to clear your mind. This is not who you are, anymore. More importantly, it's not who you want to be.

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They live through the main course and reach dessert somehow when Daigo-sama decides to lose his entire mind. "My family had asked me to extend a humble invitation to you, Heir Black," he says, followed by a low bow. "The Heron court would be honoured by your presence, at your convenience."

Itachi blinks away the nightmares creeping into his vision. "Daigo-sama's family?"

Daigo-sama raises from his bow, face set in a serene expression that does little to hide the pleased glint in his eyes. "I apologise for the misunderstanding. While Clan Takeda would be honoured by a meeting, I had meant The Fukihara Dynasty of Banshōgen Empire, yes. The Heron Throne should suffice. They aren't impressed by the callous treatment you've been subjected to in recent months. Needless to say, you and yours would be treated with the greatest respect, if you decided to, ah. Visit. For however long you might wish to do so."

Uh. He can see Reg biting his cheek and Grandfather's impersonal facade is chipping somewhat, incredulousness peeking through all the Pureblood frost. "I would be honoured to visit when circumstances allow it," he says, picking his word with care. "I have no complaints as to my current living conditions. I like being who I am. Being heir Black is my duty and my privilege."

"I'm sure," Daigo-sama agrees smoothly. "Still. The Dragon Throne has been making inquiries. I wanted to preempt their presumptuous jockeying."

The Dragon Throne?! What possible reasons do they have to be interested in Itachi of all children? Japan, alright, but the Imperial House of China?

Wait. "*Jockeying*?"

"It wouldn't do they get to host you before we do," Daigo-sama says with a straight face. "Especially with us having a proper claim." After a polite beat, he lets his lips curve in a smug smile. "My choice of life companions has never been as celebrated as it is now."

Uncle Alphard barks a hyena-laugh but doesn't comment. Itachi wills his blush down, which only increases the volume of chuckles.

"I—" He sends Reg a *look*. Courtly manners and formulaic phrases are one thing, but nobody with sense tried to teach politics to a Uchiha. Itachi was as good as they had, and his approach was to be as unapproachably inaccessible as he could convey. "Perhaps it would be appropriate to postpone this conversation to after my trial. I am certain it will cause my reputation to change."

Daigo-sama flicks a dismissive hand. "You are beyond matters of the *state*."

He is, is he? The surprise in Lord and Heir Malfoy is slowly turning into suspicion. They think all this might be an elaborate production put on for their benefit. If only. This, here, feels like a great big complication on the horizon. He doesn't have to deal with it now, and he won't, but he will have to at some point. How that will shake out, he has no idea.

"Such things can wait until Sirius reaches his majority," Lord Black finally interjects. "We look forward to discovering his inheritance."

"Naturally," Daigo-sama agrees with a shallow nod, immediately snapping back to his cool tones. "My family shares your curiosity. We look forward to Heir Black stepping into his full power."

Alright, that's enough.

"Uncle Alphard," he says, voice embarrassingly squeaky, "I have to thank you for providing the jewellery for my badgers—"

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"Well, that was awful," Itachi whines, later that evening.

"Don't be dramatic," Regulus says, eyes shining with laughter. "Lord Daigo was perfectly pleasant. I especially enjoyed how he didn't even look at the Malfoys. That was delightful."

Itachi would dearly like to be so sanguine. "I messed up. I—He makes me—" English is still difficult to grasp. "He's so—"

"I couldn't tell that you liked him," Reg allows, sobering up a little, but still blessedly unaware of the mess in Itachi's mind. "The more you spoke, the less I could understand. It all felt like a giant power play, complete with mind games and oblique threats."

"Nobody threatened anyone." Itachi crumples onto the sofa. Petulance is easier to reach than calm of any sort. "I don't want to use him to secure my badgers anymore. Not when he might wrap them all up in pretty bows and deliver them straight to Japan to—" To get Itachi to move. Because he thinks he is some sort of prophet.

"Yeah, no, that plan is out," Reg agrees. "He is a bit too interested in you for anyone's peace of mind. Am I right, Master Prott, Masters Sokolov?"

"You're sure as fuck not *wrong*, baby-Black," Garnall says, tense and amused in equal measure. "When you said crush, I did not expect it to be on the lord's part. He looked at you like you are—"

Yeah. “He is confused,” Itachi says honestly. “My Patronus made him draw certain conclusions, and my dumb attitude didn’t disabuse him any. Untangling from this will be explosive.”

“What is the deal with that, by the by?” Garnall asks lightly. Deceptively lightly. “I heard rumours that it was powerful, but nothing that would net you a place of honour in one of the most powerful empires in the world.”

“As I said,” Itachi says, “he is confused. I should have—” Kreacher was right. Flaunting his otherworldly Patronus—But what was he supposed to do? He had to become Heir Black somehow. He needed Orion out of the picture, and that was the only somewhat certain way to accomplish that.

“Never mind that,” Regulus says, trying for a soothing tone. He doesn’t know what has Itachi in such a snit, but he can recognise the intensity of it clear as day. “The important thing is that we survived the last of Grandfather’s attempts at networking. Sure, it was a bit more eventful than strictly necessary, but that is not a bad thing in itself. Lord and Lady Malfoy were impressed, which was the goal all along. No harm done.”

Harm was absolutely done. The only saving grace was that it was for future Itachi to worry about.

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Chapter End Notes

Yojijukugo: Understanding Two Four-Character Japanese Idioms

Yojijukugo (四字熟語) are Japanese compound expressions composed of four kanji characters. These compounds can function either as idiomatic expressions with

meanings that transcend their individual components or simply as compound nouns without deeper implications. In this chapter, two notable yojijukugo are mentioned:

1. **画竜点睛 (garyōtensei)**

   Applying the final touch that brings a creation to life; completing a work with essential, defining details.

   - 画 (huà): to draw
   - 竜 (lóng): dragon
   - 点 (diǎn): to dot or add
   - 睛 (jīng): eyes or pupils

   “Drawing a dragon and dotting its eyes."

   This idiom originates from a famous legend involving Zhang Sengyou, a renowned painter of the Liang dynasty known for his expertise in the ink style during the reign of Emperor Wu of Liang. According to the story, Zhang Sengyou was commissioned to paint four dragons on the walls of Anle Temple in what is now Nanjing. Demonstrating his artistic prowess and understanding of symbolism, he deliberately left the dragons' eyes blank. He believed that the dragons were so lifelike that adding the eyes would grant them life, causing them to soar into the sky.

   Skeptical onlookers found his decision absurd, prompting Zhang to proceed with painting the eyes of two of the dragons. Instantly, the dragons sprang to life, ascending to heaven on clouds accompanied by crashing thunder. This event solidified the idiom *garyōtensei*, symbolizing the critical importance of final touches that complete and animate a work, making it truly remarkable.

2. **海千山千 (umisenyamasen)**

   Describes a cunning, worldly-wise individual who has navigated numerous challenges and can adeptly handle any difficult situation.

   - 海 (umi): ocean
   - 千 (sen): thousand
   - 山 (yama): mountain
   - 千 (sen): thousand

   ”A thousand years in the ocean and a thousand years in the mountains."

   This idiom comes from an ancient saying about a snake that spends a thousand years residing in the ocean and another thousand years in the mountains before transforming into a dragon. This journey symbolizes the accumulation of experience and wisdom over many years. Consequently, someone described as

umisenyamasen is perceived as exceptionally shrewd and experienced, capable of navigating life's complexities with ease and ingenuity.

Chapter 26: Daigo interlude

If the situation was a crumb less dire, Daigo would choke with resentment. If it wasn't quite so imperative to foster a cordial relationship with the child-prophet, he'd have—

Gods, but he detests the hoopla he finds himself entangled in. After three decades of a rigid pact of non-aggression between him and his family, he's suddenly back in the thick of it. Court drama is tedious when it's pointless, but it's even worse when warranted. Even Daigo can't bring himself to think it isn't warranted, now.

How they must resent having to rely on him. Ari is endlessly amused by it—Ari is endlessly amused by everything, but the misfortune of his detractors is high up on the list. Daigo just wants to continue his work and be left alone. After all the sacrifices he's made to prune his lifestyle into a form to suit his nature—

The robes are hateful. He's visited Ari's family on occasion—when Ari wanted to flaunt him, for one reason or another—and he enjoyed himself well enough. The Blacks respect lineage, and Daigo has three millennia of continuous family magic to draw upon. Nobody thought themselves above him, however murky his circumstances of birth. Now—

Now there is a—

He launches the wretched clothes to the nearest chair and continues pacing around the room. How did an English child become the favourite of the Father of Storms? A minor spirit could have, maybe, been ignored. Susanō-no-Mikoto is a *central deity*. Amaterasu-Ōmikami chose Her champions regularly, roughly once every seven hundred years. Tsukuyomi-no-Mikoto passes His blessings on to populations, not individuals. It was accepted that Susanō-no-Mikoto doesn't—

But He does, doesn't he? Demonstrably, He does. To random children of House Black. It beggars belief. For millennia, they prayed and cajoled and pleaded and—

And Sirius Black is the favoured, somehow. Sirius Black. A child born into a line that pays the most nominal of lip services to gods they're supposedly sworn to. What are the odds? It can't be—

But it can. The child of eleven summoned a corporal protection charm in *His image*. As declarations go, you can't top that. And now—Now Daigo, who somehow found himself de-facto married into the House, has to play ambassador. *Him*. He hasn't spoken to a child willingly in *decades*. How is he supposed to—Does the child even know of his circumstances? He must, surely? Calling on the image of the Father of Storms was a deliberate choice, a sure-try way towards claiming his power. His attitude and absurd confidence only strengthen that impression. Sirius Black is no child. It's not the power, the English have been sacrificing sanity for power since they stumbled onto the scene. Sirius Black is more than powerful, he's *trained*. Someone taught the young Black Heir how to move like a warrior. Someone taught him the subtleties of body language to a degree that parallels Daigo's, and he's on the other side of fifty. Someone guided the child into sharpening his magic into the sleek, terrifying weapon that it is. That is not—

Nothing about the damned child makes sense, and Ari doesn't understand why they're making such a big deal of it. It's driving Daigo mad. Ari not taking things seriously is in character as much as anything is, but now is not the time for a devil-may-care attitude. Not when the Emperor will go to rather drastic extremes to lure the *prophet of Susanō-no-Miktoto*—

Calm down. You're of no use to anybody like this.

He slumps down and resigns himself to a long stretch of meditation. The dinner is set to begin in eleven hours. There is still time to gather what little is left of his wits.

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The child is somehow more terrifying than he remembers him to be. Daigo falls back to the strictest formal teachings just to survive it.

All his life, he was taught to worship the inherent duality of man, to observe and respect the complex flows of nature in any thinking being. Some beings take that to a beautiful extreme—the complex gender performance in gumiho was a fine example—but young Sirius Black—

Fear is not something Daigo was ever ashamed of. He is prone to fearing the unknown as much as any man is. It rarely grips him this hard. The longer Heir Black speaks, the stronger the impression of age and power behind his eyes. His manners sharpen, and his magic condenses into a dense layer kept close to his skin. Even his speech patterns shift, his accent solidifying into a strange blend of English pureblood aristocracy and something else. Something one might expect to find in Daigo's neck of the woods. Then, as if to make himself even more disturbing, all that ice disappears like so much smoke the moment the boy speaks to his brother. Go figure that the cursed child can make love as intimidating as anything else he does. Daigo has seen plenty of devotion, filial or otherwise, and he can spot a psychotic fixation when he sees it. Ari speaks fondly of Black Madness—he has plenty of it himself—but Heir Black seems to have harnessed his into a maniacal love of his younger brother.

His senses are screaming at him to run. Daigo is no battle mage, he's an *art historian*. Whoever trained Sirius Black had shaped him into a weapon. As befits Susanō-no-Mikoto's favourite, maybe. And this is the child the English press is vilifying? Putting on trial? Are they *mad?*

He's so absorbed by internal gibbering that he almost misses the godling's words. When they register a startled bark of laughter escapes him. Twice-honed blade, indeed. What a ruthless thing to say.

Where are these manners coming from, is the question? Young Sirius Black never left the Isles. He was barely let outside of his damn house. The list of people that were allowed in his vicinity is impossibly small. How, then, is he this poised? Does he remember his past life? He must. It's been known to happen, in Godly blessed. Who was he, then? Was he a hero? A villain?

Considering his Patron, he would have been a warrior. Father of Storms is not an easy Deity to serve. Ari told him about all the manoeuvring it took for Blacks to keep their heir alive. Too powerful, Ari had spoken in hushed tones, instinctively aware that some things should be whispered if they are to be said out loud at all. An unprecedented prodigy. It took a year of constant ritual magic to keep his body from breaking down, never mind the impossibly accelerated mental development. All signs of a soul that *remembers*.

How terrifying. Is he sent by the Father of Storms directly? Maybe he is not a prophet, but an avatar? Maybe he is—

He shudders at the magic concentrating around the boy's eyes. What does he see? What is he looking for? Daigo empties his mind, just in case. He has nothing to hide and his fear is reasonable, in the circumstances. Surely, the boy won't begrudge him the instinctive reaction to the impossible?

His magic is shamefully agitated, squirming around him, caught between the urge to surrender and to flee. Nothing to hide. Respect. Honour. You can do this, and maybe the boy will consent to visit. The terror he will inspire in the Heron Court should be enough to convince his cursed family that the boy is best left to wreak havoc among the English. He doesn't dare hope Sirius Black will never turn his eyes their way, but they certainly don't need to urge him to do so.

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Chapter 27

For all the drama, fuss and build-up of the trial, the day begins and unfolds without drama. Itachi and Regulus have breakfast—tense, even by Grimmauld standards—change into their most severe robes, and spend a good hour with Garnall followed by another hour with Grandfather, putting on their extensive protective enchantments. Every square inch of Itachi's body is protected with the best they could buy, blackmail or coerce. He can't be bothered feeling strongly about it one way or another.

"I won't lie," Grandfather says. "This will be a taxing and unpleasant day in the extreme. Keep your head high and your magic close. The outcome is already settled. Whatever happens there is irrelevant."

Distantly, Itachi wonders who Grandfather is trying to reassure, if clumsily so. *He's* not worried. This, in the grand scheme of things, is little more than a tedious D-rank. They aren't walking into real danger, not with how many witches and wizards will be present, who are motivated to keep Heir Black fit and happy. Or, if not happy, at least alive enough to continue keeping House Black away from them and their business. On the mental health front, he's covered too. Reg is thicker-skinned than almost anyone in there. No matter what is said, his little brother is not going to emerge traumatised. He's lived *through* everything that will be brought up in, in all likelihood, highly moralistic fashion. Kreacher will be there too, in the shadows, perfectly placed to pop him off to safety, should any actual danger surface.

Itachi is not worried, in short. What he is, is *fed up.*

He settles into Shinobi focus as they floo to the Ministry. He obediently lets the terrified young witch record and label his wand, and inclines his head as he's instructed not to use it. Ordinarily, he vaguely recalls, incoming magicals were required to leave their wands at the counter. Nobody so much as suggests such a thing, now. He puts it out of his mind, together with everything that doesn't have to do with the task at hand.

Garnall is tense. Four more of his team are in the Ministry already, guarding strategic perimeters. The communication jewellery in his ear is a phenomenal bit of magic, Itachi thinks. He should look into getting some of those. What for, whispers the part of his mind

inclined towards lurking soundlessly in tall grass, waiting for young, tender things to wobble by. It's not like you have a team to communicate with.

Dramatic. Pipe down.

Lords and Ladies from all sides of the political divide stop by to chat with Grandfather and extend their performative disgust about the whole thing. They're not all that inclined to meet his eyes for an extended period of time. He doesn't blame them. Normal people have a part of their consciousness exclusively built to ring the alarm when a killer is looking at them with great focus. Grandfather looks in turn, ill at ease and grimly proud. Regulus continues his occlumency exercises. Garnall grows even tenser.

The trial chamber is built, Itachi will freely admit, rather spectacularly. It's huge for one, much bigger than anything he would have even suspected. Built like an amphitheatre, it's divided into three sections, glittering permitter magic sectioning them off quite visibly. The accused will be, in all likelihood, sat at one of two desks at the lowest, oval surface. The other one is, presumably, set for the prosecutor. Opposite the two desks, a raised dais stands, with several smaller desks placed on either side. Space for the judge, presumably. The judge's and the clerks' desks are wrapped in a bubble of magic, similar to the witness bench on the side.

The first, thrumming magical barrier circles around the innermost level, and the benches in which the Wizengamot sits. The benches for the Wizengamot are shaped in a half-circle, split in the centre by the staircase going downwards, each row set higher up than the previous one by about a half.

A second magical barrier, this one faintly orange, marks the end of the Wizengamot and the beginning of, what Itachi can only assume, is the public part. That area is, depressingly, packed. Reporters screech as they make their way down the corridor and up to the pair of prosecutors, Lord Barrows and Lady Panravi.

The procedural greetings fly past him, and his body follows along the familiar script fully on automatic. Hundreds of people are staring at him as if he is about to be sacrificed to Jashin-sama for their viewing pleasure. He is about to be interrogated about his childhood by people

he's never met, in full view of journalists from all around the globe. Even Lord Riddle is present, wearing the face of a middle-aged older witch. Amaterasu above, but this will be an unmitigated disaster, and he can't even drug himself calm. The fastest way for a mistrial, he was told.

Mistrial. What a load of nonsense.

He's already sitting at the witness bench, because that's how these things are done, by the time Judge Zadzisai, fresh off the High Court of the ICW, marches down the steps. A bit of awareness seeps back into Itachi, as he's taking her in. They're taking this seriously, aren't they? He wouldn't want to cross this witch without a month to prepare and very few things to lose. Tall, shoulders almost as wide as her hips, Judge Akeelah Zadzisai came to a court trial wearing battle-robes. Tight-fitting ones, too, showing off her muscly arms and powerful shoulders to great effect. Instead of a wand, silver, tingling balls spill down her wrists, in the way of her people. Silver bells, that is, combined with at least two knives strapped to her thighs and several strategically placed pouches on her waist.

Judge Aheelah Zadzisai, Itachi concludes, means business and isn't all that happy to be presiding over this trial at all. Interesting.

Her clerks are significantly more tame, a train of witches and wizards in their mid-thirties, who look to be the types most at home behind a desk, several miles deep into a library. They, Itachi notes, look to be less displeased with the setting than they are with the judge.

Once again, Itachi can't blame them.

Let's just get this over with.

"The trial of one Lady Walburga Black begins today, the eleventh of October, nineteen-seventy-one," snaps the Judge. "I am Aheelah Zadzisai, of the ICW. You will all address me as *Judge* or *Judge Zadzisai."* Her fathomless black eyes trail upwards, taking in the silent Lords and Ladies, neatly divided by political ideology. Behind them, the mass of onlookers is considerably less quiet or solemn. She makes a sharp hand gesture, bells tinkling. The noise

cuts out. “By our standards, this matter has been mismanaged at all sides from the get-go. For example, the ICW issued a strong recommendation for the trial to be closed to the public. Our recommendation,” she continues, voice dripping with scorn, “was ignored. Nevertheless, I will have order in the courtroom.”

“The second point of contention is, possibly, even worse. The Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot presiding over this trial will have a chance to question both the accused and—” A muscle jumps in her jaw. “The main witness. This, I reiterate, is highly irregular. Mister Sirius Black is a witness and an underaged one at that. It would be highly inappropriate to inflict mental harm on him, merely to satisfy your curiosity. That said, this right was granted to you by a series of court rulings and Ministerial permissions, the legality of which I will not comment on at this time.”

She sweeps her eyes over the assembled Wizengamot, not a single trace of fear in sight. When she reaches Itachi, her lips press in a tight line. “I will shut down excessively inappropriate questions, but I find myself in the inevitable position of having to ask for your good sense. There is no honour or worth in badgering a child of eleven, no matter what you may think of his House’s politics. I can’t force you to be decent, but I will lower myself to ask it. Make of that what you will.”

Itachi grieves that he is meeting this woman under such grotesque conditions. Maybe she will let him trail behind her when he gets older? He could intern with her, it would be thrilling, without a doubt.

“One final thing, before we begin. As a result of how this affair was managed, young Sirius Black’s life has been put in danger, to the point that it had reached the ICW. After reviewing the case, we approved a full team of our Hit Wizards to contract with House Black and secure their young Heir’s life. That team is present today.” Itachi begins seeping back into his mind, present enough to listen but not enough to feel very strongly a all. “Along the same lines, I will point out that the barriers separating the sections of the courtroom have been strengthened by the best we have. If someone is foolish enough to attack, the barriers will activate, trapping everyone and anyone inside, until *my* security teams deactivate them from the outside. You do not, I assure you, want that to happen.”

With a final, tight pursing of the lips, the Judge drags an incriminating eye over the assembled Lords and Ladies.

“Think about the level of danger we have judged young Sirius Black to be in, that would necessitate this level of security. Think about it and feel shame, because it is your doing. With that, let us begin. Aurors, bring in the accused.”

Walburga is not in any way diminished by her time in Auror custody. She is as ruthlessly beautiful as ever, wild dark hair caught in an elaborate hairdo, face frozen in an expression of vague superiority. The drab uniform robes she wears look like couture, like a high-end avant-garde designer had wanted to experiment. She barely spares Itachi a glance, but she does incline her head at the judge and send another, deeper nod to Grandfather. Both gestures go unanswered. If she is upset by this, she doesn’t show it by gesture or expression. Instead, she settles into the seat gracefully and waits for her arguer to be called.

The arguer turns out to be a pair of arguers. Twins, in fact. Vaguely Italian, or maybe French, if the somewhat debonair cut of their robes were any indication. Both Purebloods, quite visibly, and thus, beautiful.

“Arguers Levi,” purrs the witch. “At your service, Judge.”

“Well met. The prosecutors may step inside.”

In comparison, Lord Barrows and Lady Panravi are quite outclassed. Judging by how the skin around their eyes and lips tightened, they are aware of it more than anyone. Rather immature of them, honestly. They are handsome in their own right and could hold their own even among most Purebloods. The twins are in a separate league. It is pointless to insist on comparing themselves with a group with workably limitless gold spent on prenatal magic.

“Head Prosecutor Barrows and Assistant Prosecutor Panravi at your service, Judge.”

“Well met. The witness is already present, for whatever unfathomable reason. Present yourself, young wizard.”

Itachi stands. He can barely hear anything, see anything or acknowledge anything except the judge, Walburga and her team and the two discretely scowling prosecutors. “Heir Sirius Black, of House Black. Witness for the prosecution.” He pauses. Nobody had instructed him in the particulars, and he isn’t going to ape without knowing precisely what he is conveying. “My honour, Judge Zadzisai,” he says, with a short, polite nod, in no way baring his neck to any of them.”

“Well met. You may sit down. Prosecutors, state your case.”

“Thank you, Judge—”

Itachi blocks out the noise. He doesn’t have a particularly justified case for disliking Prosecutor Barrows, but he does and is perfectly willing to indulge. There is something brown-nosing about the man. He seems like the man who cares very little about the case and more about who will be inclined to reward him should he win it.

Perhaps you are simply projecting. He *could* simply be incompetent.

“Witness Black,” says Barrows, jolting him from the semi-meditative trance he learned for the inevitably long stretches of time where your target isn’t positioned well enough to eliminate. “As a primary witness to the events of August 29th, you are willing and capable of telling this body what had happened.”

“I am,” he says, inclining his head. The amplification charm is rather shoddy. He pitches his voice a bit lower and makes himself talk slower. “Alternatively, I would offer my memories. I have no particular gift for public speaking.”

“Objection,” female Levi says politely. “The events you describe were committed by the late Orion Black. Our client had had nothing to do with it.”

“And your basis is,” Judge Zadzisai says over the prosecutor.

“Poisoning the cauldron, Judge. No evidence has been submitted to this court that our client had any prior knowledge of what would take place. How could she? Heir Black had entered their residence covertly and unannounced. No evidence links her to the attacks perpetrated against Heir Black. Indeed the two haven’t even been within eyesight. Dragging out late Orion Black’s crimes to tarnish our client’s reputation is inappropriate.”

“Is this true, Heir Black?”

Itachi inclines his head. “All of it. Walburga Black did not raise a wand to me. Her husband, Orion Black had, that day and at innumerable other times. I am not confident enough to assert she directed him to do so.”

The prosecutor sends him a furious look and he arches his eyebrows at him. Did he expect Itachi to lie?

“Very well. Prosecution may not proceed with this line of questioning. Proceed.”

“Witness Black,” Barrows says in a tight voice. “Is it your subjective opinion the accused had been aware of or had facilitated the attack upon you on August 29th.”

Itachi considers this briefly. “I would say so, yes.”

“Why.”

“Her signature was on the wards that prevented me from escaping.” He unfocuses his eyes so he doesn’t have to watch the sea of adults hanging on his every word. “I tried to, quite forcefully. Even our house elf couldn’t run for help. To further illustrate my point, there were two sets of wards. The first was cast by Orion Black, and I could escape them by applying a very involved method of jumping out of the window. The second was woven by Walburga Black. I could not have escaped them with anything I had at my disposal at this time.” He pauses, taking the time to take a sip of water. “Or now. Walburga Black is a formidable witch.”

The prosecutor grows more confident, as if this was a scoring point. Itachi wonders, vaguely, how they plan to argue this case. It doesn't much matter either way, of course. Walburga Black won't walk the earth a free witch no matter how much the prosecution fumbles, but it is a disappointment nonetheless. Not everybody has the resources to secure all the votes beforehand.

"Were these wards in place when you entered the house?"

Itachi surpasses a startled blink, but he doesn't guard his expression quite well enough if the subtle commotion in the Wizengamot is any indication. What a question.

"No. Otherwise, I would not have been able to enter." Obviously.

"Therefore," the prosecutor forges on, "you claim to have been deliberately trapped there by the accused. Trapped inside, where you would be attacked with the intent to murder by the late Orion Black."

A small twinge of dark humour bubbles up, up, from his stomach, up his throat, warming him up in a manner of speaking. "I would rather not speculate about his overarching intent and motivations. What I can say, is that he had intended to torture me very thoroughly. Whether or not he intended me to survive it, is up in the air." The same bubble of humour sours into cruelty, at the prosecutor's expectant, coaxing look. "If you would like me to guess, I would say that last Cruciatus would have stopped my heart had I not, pardon my language, killed him instead."

"Objection," hums the defence Arguer.

"Agreed. The prosecution has been instructed not to pursue this line of questioning. Prosecutor Barrows, you will not be warned again."

"My apologies, Judge. I will take care to guide the witness more carefully."

Itachi's lips tilt in a cynical smirk. He inclines his head. "My apologies, Judge," he echoes.

"Proceed."

"Has your mother--" Itachi's eyebrows climb up. Going for spectacle, are we? "—Ever harmed you?"

"Objection. Irrelevant."

Barrows puffs up. "I am establishing a pattern of behaviour that would be highly relevant to this case."

"Elaborate, Prosecutor," the Judge says, face inscrutable. Itachi thinks she is angry, although he can't be certain, naturally.

"Establishing motive, for one. A history of abuse would increase the likelihood of the accused having enabled the attack of her son."

There it is again. Itachi's smirk melts into a sneer. "Judge Zadzisai, if I may," he says, tilting his head. "I would ask that everybody involved in this trial remembers to use the proper manner of address. There is no point in emphasising the relation between the accused and myself, other than for emotional shock that surely has no place here."

The judge looks at him properly, for once. He doesn't shy away from it, as heavy as the gaze may be. "Ordinarily, the witness would address such comments towards the prosecution. In this case, I do see why you would opt for myself. Very well, Witness Black. Prosecutor—" She doesn't stop her odd stare-down for a moment. "You will address all participants appropriately. Witness Black is not the only one to have noticed the sudden shift in manner. I am not dull, nor unobservant. You are on treacherous ground. Tread lightly."

“My apologies, Judge,” the prosecutor says. Itachi doesn’t look his way either, as foolishly determined not to fail whatever test the judge is administering as he is, but he can hear the flustered tone easily enough. This is not going the way he had hoped, it seems. It seemed like such a straightforward case, and yet—

The judge inclines her head finally, and Itachi lowers his eyes and returns the polite gesture. Success? Maybe.

“Proceed with your explanation, prosecutor.”

“Yes, yes of course. Questioning Witness Black about a history of abuse by the accused would establish motive and a pattern of behaviour.”

The judge exhales a careful breath. “Go ahead. If your questions cross the line, I will replace you with your assistant. No more warnings.”

“Thank you, Judge.” Barrows turns to Itachi, eyes cold and irritated. “Witness Black. Has the accused been abusive towards you or your younger brother Regulus, during your time in her care?”

Easily two-thirds of his fixed calm evaporates on the spot. “Regulus is not involved in this case, Prosecutor,” he says. The steel in his voice plays oddly with the amplification charm, resulting in an unintended effect of his voice whipping through the courtroom. “I would advise you to keep his name out of your mouth.”

“Witness Black—”

“No,” he says, aiming for sweet but ending up closer to serpentine. “I am not on trial here. I am, in fact, your whole case. You will keep my brother’s name out of your mouth or I will petition Judge Zadzisai to declare a mistrial and see about hiring a team of lawyers to press a prosecutorial mismanagement suit. I might even inquire if the accused’ arguers are available. They seem like eminently capable people.”

The volume of whispers in the Wizengamot increases. Out in the public section, cameras flash.

“Prosecutor Barrows, you are excused,” Judge Zadzisai says. “If I wasn’t so loathe to have to sit through this again, I would, indeed, declare this a mistrial. I will give your assistant a chance to argue this case competently.”

“Merry part, Judge,” grits out Barrows, spins on his heel and leaves. Good riddance.

Assistant Prosecutor—now, possibly, just Prosecutor—Panravi stands and approaches.

“Witness Black, same question. Has the accused abused you during the time you spent in her care?”

Alright, she’s pissed. Good luck. Maybe the two of them *are* a couple, as like had vaguely assumed.

“Define abuse, Prosecutor.”

“Has she inflicted undue harm on you, for no other purpose than to cause you pain or distress?”

He thinks about this. “It is difficult to say. I can say with some certainty I was, as you say, abused while living in that house, but most of it was done by the late Orion Black.”

“Was the accused aware of this behaviour and had she instructed Orion Black to do so.”

“She was aware, certainly. As for the second part of your question, again, I cannot answer one way or the other.” He finds himself shrugging. “Orion Black was, for the most part, a dull, mindless man. I would be surprised to learn he was even capable of autonomous thought. Having said that, people do exceed my expectations now and again. If there was one

area where he would rise above his limitations, it would be so he could inflict pain on those he felt he could." A small, satisfied smile wants to form, and he lets it. He isn't broken up about the whole thing, other than in the abstract. "However misguided that notion might be. Considering." Goodness.

"Please answer clearly, Witness Black."

He feels his body cool with irritation. "Very well. Yes to the first part of the question. Possibly, to the second." There. Is that clear enough?

"Thank you," she says with tightly leashed impatience. "You have petitioned Lord Black to take up your guardianship, shortly before the event in question, correct."

"Yes."

"Objection."

The judge arches her brows. "Overruled. The question falls under establishing motive."

"Witness Black?"

Itachi patches up the holes in his patience as best he can. "That is correct, Prosecutor."

"Why have you done so, and why then? You had started spending the majority of your free time with Lord Black for almost two years beforehand. Why have you not asked immediately?"

Uh. "My primary reason for the petition was that I was enrolled into Hogwarts. I felt it was important to settle the matter fully before I had started the term."

“Why?”

Dull. “Because I felt Orion and Walburga Black were unfit guardians and I did not want to be beholden to them in any way.”

“I see. Why then? Had the matter changed, during the months you spent between the two Black residences?”

“It had, yes.” He will have to get into this, won’t he? “Orion and Walburga Black were, from my perspective, very displeased about us claiming sanctuary at Castle Black. Orion Black especially was becoming unworkably volatile. Things escalated after Lord Black secured independent income for the two of us, thus cutting away their primary mode of control.”

“Why did you first petition Lord Black for sanctuary and when?”

“Objection.”

“Overruled. Continue.”

And now they’re dragging *Atlas* into this. “Orion Black and myself got into an altercation, at the night of my Presentation,” he says, a bit more sharply than intended. With a deep inhale, he settles back into sharp, professional impassivity. “Regulus had been sick with Dragon Pox. I did not want to leave him. Walburga Black immobilised me while Orion Black killed our dog, presumably to demonstrate his authority. I broke out of Walburga Black’s spell, knocked her unconscious, shattered Orion Black’s ribcage and set his wand on fire. Lord Black intervened before things could escalate further.”

The prosecutor blinks, mouth closing with a click. You didn’t know? How amateurish.

“Does that answer your question, Prosecutor,” he asks sharply.

“I—Yes. Thank you, Witness Black. Would you say this altercation had any impact on your relationship with the accused?”

Itachi indulges in a slow, measured blink. “I can only speculate, but I would assume so. It was a rather dramatic affair.”

“Would you say the accused resented you? Resents you still?”

“I never was very interested in deciphering the accused’s thoughts and feelings, Prosecutor.”

“Answer the question, Witness Black.”

And this is by *his side*. “If I *had* to *speculate,* I would say no. The accused did not and does not care enough to resent me.”

“I see. One last question, before I hand the witness over to the defence. If you had to speculate, do you think the accused was capable of and willing to orchestrate and direct the attack on you?”

Capable and willing? “I would say she was capable of and willing to orchestrate *an* attack on me, Prosecutor. I am unsure if this would be how she would have gone about it. I would say Walburga Black would have devised a plan that no untrained eleven-year-old would survive. Then again, if she were to design an attack that she could claim ignorance of, perhaps this was a good way of going about it after all.”

“Thank you, that would be all.”

Halfway done, hey?

Chapter 28

The male Arguer stands, in an almost comically fluid manner. The contrast between his suave body language and Barrows' officious, almost pompous approach makes Itachi, ironically, fond of the Arguer. He is his opponent in this fictional battle whose outcome was concluded before the authorities were on the scene, but Itachi can respect a man who takes a losing case as seriously as if he had a chance.

"Witness Black," says the man, honey-hazel eyes trained on him, "well met. My sister and I will try our best to keep our inquiries short and to the point."

"Merry meet, Arguer Levi," Itachi replies. The initial composure with which he walked into this charade is chipped, but not shamefully so. "I look forward to being in your care." The Arguer is not the only one who can weaponise their politeness, and Itachi has the added benefit that he's a child of eleven who looks to be nine. What looks charming on the debonair Arguer looks disturbing on Itachi.

That surprised him. He recovers after a fracture of a moment, but Itachi knows what he saw.

"Just so. I will lay out the facts of the case as I understand them."

"Please."

"Lord Black had, at your request, applied and had been granted guardianship of you, on September 29th. This was announced at a semi-private event at Castle Black on the 27th, as witnessed by a wide selection of your peers."

Itachi inclines his head. "That is correct."

"Thank you. That same day you had your house elf assist you in covertly entering the residence of your erstwhile caretakers, Orion and Walburga Black."

“Yes.”

“Why had you done so?”

Itachi’s lips twitch. “To commit burglary, mostly. All of our belongings were there, still, and I had wanted to collect them before a mysterious fire took them. As unpleasant as that house was, we grew up there, and had collected items of significant emotional value.”

“Could you not have asked Lord Black to arrange the matter more securely? You had stated Orion Black was a violent, abusive man. Why go alone, with only a house elf for protection.”

Clever. He can’t argue that Orion *isn’t* a violent man, but he can confuse the circumstances. “I have known to be impulsive, occasionally. Reckless, even. After repelling Orion time and time again, I had come to the conclusion he was too incompetent to harm me. As the facts of the case can attest, I was incorrect.”

“I see.” The Arguer tilts his head to the side, idly strolling around the polished floor. Itachi lets himself admire the lines of his body as they are outlined by the heavy drape of his robes. “You do not mention being cautious of our client, only of Orion Black.”

“Only a fool would not be cautious of your client, Arguer,” he says. “That said, I had not expected she would attack me. As, indeed, she had not.”

“How kind of you to acknowledge that,” the Arguer purrs. “One wonders why this trial is taking place if the prosecution’s star witness is acknowledging our client committed no attack.”

Itachi’s faint smile deepens. “To answer your rhetorical question, I would speculate that facilitating a crime is still a crime.”

“Ah,” the Arguer replies, “but is defending your home from an unlawful break-in an attack?”

“That would be an important question to answer,” Itachi agrees. “Another such important question would be, if I may, why were the wards triggered by my magical signature specifically if they had been concerned about security.”

“Well,” the Arguer says, honey eyes deceptively gentle. “There was that matter with the crushed ribcage and the destroyed wand.”

Itachi stops himself from an honest laugh. What a bold statement. “I suppose that is true. It is possible Orion and Walburga Black were so worried that an eleven-year-old would murder them in their beds, that they decided to build wards around their property specifically to trap said crazed murderer inside. With what I know of Orion Black, your theory could be right on the money.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare suggest such a thing,” the Arguer replies, eyes dancing. “I am simply remarking upon the odd sequence of events. A boy claims asylum from an abusive household, then breaks into his erstwhile home the very next day. An altercation ensues, in which Orion Black loses his life, Walburga Black is arrested and Sirius Black remains Heir Black, set to inherit the most prestigious title in WIzarding Britain.”

“Arguer,” the Judge says. “Sirius Black is not on trial here.”

“I am establishing motive, Judge,” quips the Arguer and grins at her irritated scowl.

“No games, Arguer. Proceed.”

“How would you describe your relationship with our client,” Levi says, after a brief pause.

Itachi hums. “I am afraid you will have to specify, Arguer Levi.”

“Would you describe our client as violent? Prone to mood swings? Quick to resort to violence?”

Itachi considers this. “I am a Black, Arguer Levi. I am afraid I have no context or perspective from which to quantify these things.”

“Let me put it this way. If Orion Black was not present that day, do you think our client would have attacked you in his place?”

Itachi doesn’t even have to think about it. “No. Walburga Black has respect for her House and her Lord. She wouldn’t *help* me, indeed she might rejoice in seeing me suffer, but she would not go out of her way to harm me.”

“So you think the events unfolded by Orion Black’s design?”

“Inasmuch as that man could plan. I can’t offer anything but conjecture, but I doubt the accused would have directed her husband to murder a child on her property by using the Unforgivables.”

“I see, I see. Is it possible, then, that our client was instructed by her husband to build wards, without being aware of what the purpose behind that request was?”

The very idea—

“Anything is possible, Arguer,” he says, smiling. “I admit that the idea of Orion Black demanding anything of his wife is amusing in the extreme, but I can’t rule it out.”

“Thank you. Indulge me in another hypothetical, if you would. Could Orion Black have deceived my client, by, for example, asking her to create the wards that would keep you in the house for long enough that a reconciliation could take place?”

Itachi lets his smile widen. He plants an elbow onto the wooden bench in front of him and leans his chin in his palm. “Are you suggesting Orion Black had harnessed a thus far unearthed well of intellectual capacity and managed to convince *Walburga Black* that the best path forward is to mend bridges with their wayward son?”

“You had stated the wards were created to keep you in, but that in no way indicates a malicious intent,” replies the Arguer. Itachi can see how much it’s costing him to keep a straight face.

“That is true,” he allows. “The wards, by themselves, cannot be malicious. Very well. It is possible, I suppose. I can’t see how events could have unfolded in the way they had if that were the case, but it is possible.”

“Which brings me to my next question. The wards on the residence were built by Orion Black, were they not?”

“They were.”

“Can you state with certainty that they did not include a component that would keep our client inside? The altercation between Orion Black and yourself took place in the garden.”

Itachi barely stops himself from laughing out loud. “Are you asking me if it is possible that *Orion Black* managed to construct wards that would have trapped his wife inside of her own home?”

“I am asking you if you could assert with utmost confidence that is not what had happened. The records of the wards around the residence were not collected by the Auror team that was on the scene, but they fell after Orion Black’s—After the event took place. We have no way of knowing for certain, do we, Witness Black.”

And a masterful weaving in of the widespread belief Itachi destroyed Orion’s magic.

“I suppose it is possible,” he says, delighted. “Anything is possible.”

“Thank you, Witness Black. The defence rests.”

He takes a seat. Itachi’s gaze trails away, beyond amused.

“The floor will be opened to the Wizengamot now,” says the Judge. Her voice, he notes, has grown low and intense. “I trust I do not need to treat you like schoolchildren. I do not trust you to think you will behave. If your questions cross the line of what is appropriate for this court, I will shut them down. If this trend continues, I will declare the questioning finished. Proceed.”

Itachi turns to the Wizengamot, taking them in for the first time.

The Blacks are out in big numbers, he notes fondly. They can’t vote, of course, but nobody would dare forbid them entry to the Wizengamot. Grandfather is with Regulus, two of them bracketed by Aunt Cassie and Uncle Alphard. Garnall and the Russians are present and accounted for, blank-faced and combat-ready. Excellent. Reg looks pale and drawn, but not all that upset. If anything, Grandfather is angrier than anyone, jaw clenched and magic dense around him. Pollux isn’t there interestingly, but—Ah.

Lord, Lady and Heir LeStrange are all present, several seats away from the Blacks. Cousin Bella looks thrilled. That’s worrying.

Who else is important? Lord Riddle is somewhere in the outermost ring, as well as, presumably, Daigo-sama. Lord and Lady Potter are guarded by Yuanjun and Lady Corvi—Wait. Yuanjun and Lady Corvi should be guarding—

Is that *James?!* It is, James Potter, sickly pale, lips bitten down to the blood, eyes red as if he was on the verge of crying. He catches Itachi’s eyes and flinches.

Itachi exhales a bracing breath and settles for sending Aunt Dorea a look of focused scorn. What was she *thinking*, exposing her eleven-year-old fairy-prince nephew to this filth?!

He tries sending his cousin an encouraging smile. He fails. He's far too Uchiha right now to be anything but cynical and violent.

"Heir Black—"

"Witness Black," he hears himself say. In and out, this is not the game you're playing. "Unless this is what you want Heir Black to remember you by?" Unless you would dare treat Heir Black like this, hangs in the air, acknowledged but undressed.

"Ah, yes, Witness Black, quite right, quite right," says the flustered Lord. "Witness Black, the defence led you into claiming it is possible the accused did not know about the crimes committed against you. Would you say it is likely this is the case?"

Itachi curves his eyes into a sweet smile. The man likely doesn't deserve Itachi's scorn, but, well. James is here. Reg—he's made his peace with Reg being dragged into things that shouldn't touch him in a million years but James is *soft.* He's the very definition of an indulged civilian aristocrat, born into wealth, prestige and love. Bringing him here is cruel and unnecessary and—

And it may have destroyed what warmth there was between them. Itachi was as careful with his Hogwarts kids as he was able. He played with soft paws, emphasising his cluelessness and social incompetence. Now, James has a full-frontal show of just how flippant Itachi can be about murdering his father. Just how well he fits in with the worst of humanity.

His pause is unnerving the Lord. Get a grip. "No. Arguer Levi tells an interesting story but the idea of Walburga Black being in any way manipulated by her husband is unlikely in the extreme. I couldn't in good faith reject the possibility, but it is about as likely as my family swearing off magic and spending the rest of their natural lives in quiet contemplation in a Christian monastery."

"Aha-ha," squeaks the Lord. "Thank you, Witness Black."

“The pleasure is mine.” Who is next?

“Had Walburga Black ever harmed you, or acted unlawfully in your presence,” asks Lord Doge.

Itachi centres himself. “Surely the second part of your question falls outside of the scope of this matter?”

The Lord scowls. “Answer the question, Witness Black.”

Itachi indulges in a cool smile. “I am tempted to say *‘or what’* Lord Doge.”

“Witness Black—”

“Enough,” barks the Judge. “Witness Black is correct. Re-phrase your question in a manner appropriate for this setting and stop wasting our time.”

“Has Walburga Black ever harmed you?”

“She never cast a spell deliberately designed to hurt outside of those meant to be a teaching aid. Stinging spells and the like.” Well. He hasn’t *lied*.

“Has she ever rewarded you,” asks his wife.

Itachi feels a part of his patience crumble. “Well, Lady Doge, there was the time when one of our tutors made the mistake of raising his wand to Regulus and making him cry. In return, I set his arm—and, thus, his wand—on fire. I got a dog, as a reward.”

“My *word,* child—”

“Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot,” the Judge says, “remember to keep your questions *on point.”*

Lady Prewett is next. She, Itachi notes with some amusement, can’t stand the sight of him. “How did you kill Orion Black?”

“In self-defence,” Itachi says sweetly. His blood is well and truly boiling. Careful. “Or did you want to know the precise details? I admit, my memories are somewhat foggy, what with all the Unforgivables.” *Careful. “*I can narrate a somewhat clear memory since you are so very hungry for specifics. It was between two Crucios; Mister Black had come close, you see, presumably to gloat, and I managed to lurch up, stab my wand into his thigh and *push—”*

The Judge clears her throat. Itachi, not that willing to stop his cruel stare-off with—admittedly, sickened—witch, falls into a mocking half-bow. “My apologies,” he croons. “Was that inappropriate?”

“Very,” the Judge says. “I am not famous for my patience, or my willingness to let things slide. Proceed with *care*.”

“Would you say your mother cared about you,” asks Lady Fortescue.

Itachi’s palms are tingling slightly. “Lady Fortescue,” he says carefully. “Would you care to rephrase that question?”

The impetuous twit has the audacity to roll her eyes a little. “Yes, yes. Would you say the *accused* cared for you?”

“She invested a lot of gold into keeping me alive,” he says, fighting to speak fluidly with a jaw that wants to close around a jugular. “If that answers your question.”

“No, it does not, but then again, I would not expect a Black to know the distinction.”

“Charming,” says Itachi as the Judge slams her palm to the bench.

“House Fortescue is hereby excluded from this hearing. They will be forbidden from casting a vote in this matter. Depending on how things develop, I will invest some of my very limited free time into studying what options *I* have to pursue the matter further.”

“You can’t do that,” Lord Fortescue says, jumping to his feet. “Nobody has the right to exclude a Noble House from casting their rightful vote.”

“I think you will find I do have that right,” sneers Judge Zadzisai. “I judge you to be compromised, bigoted and, quite frankly, despicable. The second two attributes I can’t do much about, but the first one is grounds for excluding you from the vote. Now, with absolutely no due respect, shut up and get out of my sight. *Proceed with the questioning.”*

“How did your house elf escape, and why didn’t he take you with him,” asks Lord Shacklebolt. A twinge of memory tickles—Ah. The honey-voiced Auror.

“Kreacher found a hole in the wards barely big enough to squeeze through,” he says, retreating into less combative tones with great effort. “After we escaped the residence and reached the garden, I stayed to—distract Orion Black, while he went ahead to get Lord Black.”

“How long did it take for Lord Black to reach you?”

“Not long,” Itachi says. “The altercation was rather brief. With that said, Lord Black had to wait for the Aurors to tear down the wards.”

“Why didn’t he use family magic,” asks Lord Macmillan. Several agitated, scandalised eyes from the Dark-to-Neutral part of the chamber train on him.

“You’re welcome to ask him,” Itachi says, focusing on his breathing. “I am sure he will indulge such a polite and non-invasive question.”

“What happened when you were born, that it took so many healers to keep you alive—”

Itachi doesn’t even have time to sneer at Lord Crouch before the Judge intervenes.

“The questioning is over. Congratulations, you exceeded my worst fears about how this trial might go. It boggles the mind. Witness Black, you may step down to the bench. My sincere apologies for my part in this travesty. Thank you for your efforts.”

“It was my honour,” Itachi says. “I look forward to observing the rest of the trial.”

Itachi isn’t fool enough to listen to anything Walburga Black has to say. From the snippets he heard, Prosecutor Panravi fumbled through bravely, established the minimum that was necessary and even tried to bully some more. She failed, of course, but she always would have.

The defence Arguer is the female Levi, this time.

He blocks them out again. This won’t take long. There is nothing really to be said here—

“—t my son.”

Itachi’s metaphorical ears perk up. What was that?

“Would you mind elaborating, Defendant Black?”

“That thing sitting there is not my son. It is not anybody’s son. It is a thing, a tool I created to serve House Black. That he has been granted personhood is a failing of the system. I did what I could to instil the proper way of things into its mind. I suppose time will tell if I succeeded.”

“Objection?”

Itachi is distantly amused at the confused tone of the Prosecutor.

“I am establishing motive, Judge,” purrs Arguer Levi, matching her brother’s tone to the last note.

“You are in your rights to do so, Arguer. Keep in mind that the plea you entered does not cover insanity.”

Itachi bites down a smile. Judge Zadzisai might not be what one would call impartial, but then again, it’s not like this is a real trial.

“Defendant Black,” continues the Arguer, something smug hanging in the sharp consonants and rolling vowels. “When you say Witness Black is a tool, do you mean that in a metaphorical sense? That we are all tools meant to serve our families?”

“No. I mean that I performed a ritual that would summon a soul cast out of the Summerlands as I gave birth. I mean that the thing you see there wearing a human body is nothing more than a—”

The din of the Wizengamot rises so high that her words can’t be heard. Itachi—

Itachi finds he wants to laugh. That explains some things. What an odd time and a place for such a revelation. A lost soul, cast out of the Summerlands—or Heavens, in his first world. It explains a lot.

"—ness Black?"

*"*Oh, I do apologise, I was admittedly a bit taken aback. Would you mind repeating your question, Judge Zadzisai" Some of his amusement must show through because Judge Zadzisai looks at him like he has lost his mind. Judging by the quiet in the courtroom, she must have silenced the room. The Aurors have taken Walburga back to her spot, possibly spelled quiet. The Arguers, bless them, look to be in rapture.

"Are you alright, child? That—"

Oh, he can work with this. "I try not to listen to anything Defendant Black has to say," he says airily.

"That is not what I meant, Witness Black," the Judge says after a short pause. "But I suppose you answered my question in a roundabout way."

Itachi doesn't bite down on his laugh in time, and it comes out a little strangled. "Oh, I do apologise. I am simply—" He shrugs helplessly. "Do you mind if I address the Wizengamot briefly, Judge Zadzisai?"

She sighs, rubbing a hand over her eyes briefly in a startlingly human gesture of being at the end of her rope. "I might as well allow it. This whole trial has been a circus, so why not this? Go ahead, Witness Black."

"Thank you, Judge." He bends into a half-bow. "I will be brief." He turns to his captive audience. My, but they are rattled, aren't they? The less about the chaos in the public section the better, but the Wizengamot are staring at him like he's going to be handing out secrets to immortality.

“Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot. I understand this will all spin out of control, so let me try to calm your worried minds a little. I assure you, I am no demon, but.” He exhales slowly. The corners of his lips are twitching. It is physically taxing to keep himself from laughing. “But I assure you I will agree to whatever test you have for—” Deep breaths, Itachi. “Possession? Or would it be villainous reincarnation?” He pauses to inhale another deep breath. His voice is a bit strangled. “I suppose, you could always go with breaking and entering.” That’s it, that’s everything he can take. He breaks, hiding his laughter behind a hand as best he can. “I do apologise, Lords, Ladies, Judge. This is frightfully inappropriate. I am taking this—” He almost breaks again. “I am taking this seriously. This is a very reasonable accusation, and I assure you I am—” He hides his smile behind his hand. Goodness, he’s almost tearing up. “—giving it due attention.”

“Thank you for that, Witness Black.”

Itachi nods, glancing up to see her exasperated half-smile, and diving back to the safety of his hand.

“My honour, Judge Zadzisai. Thank you for giving me a chance to—” Don’t laugh, seriously. “*—defend myself.”*

“Sit down and shut up, young man.” The Judge bangs both her palms on the wooden desk in front of her and stands up in an impressive loom. The sound-cancelling charm disappears. “I suppose you had enough time to compose yourselves?”

About half of the Wizengamot looks dreadfully ashamed, Itachi notes with glee. Around a third—Dark and Neutral Houses mostly—look unimpressed, which leaves, what, a sixth, looking rebellious.

“Needless to say, no such ritual exists,” the Judge continues in a breathtaking show of patient scorn. “And even if it did, the babe would have died immediately. As much as some would like to pretend otherwise, humans don’t have enough power to summon a soul from the afterlife, much less bind it to *a living, breathing babe.*” She shakes her head. “I am ashamed for you, that you would be so quick to believe such an outrageous claim.”

Itachi's hiccup is quiet but audible in the dead silence that falls on the courtroom after the Judge has finished her monologue. "You can still test me if you want," he says, fully unable to resist. "I'm sure we can figure something out. Impersonation? Falsely identifying to the authorities? Illegal discorporation? Or would that be just corporation, if we assume it wasn't *me* who chucked the initial soul out—"

"As the Great Mother as my witness, child, you will stop needling the witless chickens or we will never be done with this trial!"

Itachi hiccups again. "Ah. My. My apologies, Judge Zadzisai. I will behave."

Goodness, he needed that. Everything about this is hilarious, most of all because it's true. He meets Reg's eyes, and grins, wide and delighted. Reg grins back. He knew his wonder of a little brother would appreciate the humour in this.

Chapter 29: Daigo interlude

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a lot to be said, Daigo thinks, about being the only well-informed person in the room. He doesn't know where he might begin if he were to try saying them. One such thing, upsettingly, is that it wasn't anywhere near as rewarding as it should.

Typically, being the best-informed person in the room meant wealth, prestige and schadenfreude for him, and shame, helplessness and financial ruin for less fortunate courtlings. This time, however, he feels a rather different blend of sensations.

All things considered, Daigo thinks, he feels rather like the one zebra that spotted orange and black in an otherwise tiger-less savannah. He takes a moment to force his hands to relax; they're bunching up the fabric of his outer robes. No, what he is, is a zebra, sent by other zebras conveniently thousands of miles away, to talk to the tiger and bring it back, should it prove amenable, or die horribly and, therefore, warn the flock.

His metaphor is spinning out of control. His head throbs. Young Sirius Black's lips curve in a horrible smile as the boy continues shedding more and more of his human skin. The prosecutor continues making a mess of things. Even the judge, who looked to have an eminently sensible head on her shoulders, refuses to see what was right there.

Not for the first time, Daigo considers the future.

The English were incredibly diverse, he always felt. Unlike Daigo's people, you never could form a concrete picture of what they, as a people, might do, think, or be like. It could be all the conquering they did, that expanded their gene pools. It could be the maniacal way in which they breed for strength and nothing else. It could very well be the weather. Surely, the miserable, damp drudgery of living in England would drive the most virtuous being into cackling villainy. Whatever the reason, the effect was chaos. They did a million different things—intrigue, rebellion, innovation, anarchism—none of them very well, but very eagerly.

Daigo's people, in contrast, did considerably fewer things, but they did them for thousands of years longer and have elevated them to an art form. Take intrigue, for example. The local Noble Houses were, by his standards, ambitious children. They birthed a modest but steady trickle of impossibly powerful psychopaths, but even their despots haven't yet gotten past the basic paradigm of 'be born—gather minions—conquer—rule—be killed almost immediately'. In a very real way, having the Avatar of Susanō-no-Mikoto be born *here* is a stroke of immense luck. If the boy is this annoyed by the British making a mess of things, then the Heron or Jade Courts would have driven him to indiscriminate violence as soon as he became conscious of his powers. The Dragon Court doesn't bear thinking about.

The surface of his privacy bubble shudders. There is too much ambient magic in the air, he thinks. Poor fools caught right at the worst possible place, where they're poking a dragon in the eye with a wooden chopstick without even knowing it. Once the dragon has had enough, their ignorance won't save them, and, afterwards, nobody will be singing about their bravery either.

He shakes his head. Focus.

Focus on what? What is there to see, exactly? What is there to do? This whole damn thing is pointless. He already knew that the English nobility wasn't long for this world, especially those who actively antagonised the godling in their midst. The only possible thing for him to do is, one, be seen by the godling in question in hopes of being remembered fondly, and two, be near Ari, ready with a quick portkey to take them back to the *Revenge* when things go the way of massacres and terror.

Walburga Black is called to the stand, and Sirius Black sits on his bench politely, if horrors wearing human skin could be thought of as polite. Which is to say that he sprawls, coming off as both aware of his surroundings and confident that everything he is aware of doesn't merit thinking about.

Then, Walburga Black says: It is not my son, and static explodes from the tips of his fingers.

***

Well, that explains some things. A soul banished from the Summerlands? That's *right up Susanō-no-Mikoto's alley and—*

The godling laughs, presumably amused by the thought that mortals think themselves capable of curtailing its power and purpose. Daigo swallows, but settles down some, strengthening the privacy bubble as far as it can go. He doesn't need a record made of his shamefully transparent reaction. It might endanger the godling's half-hearted cover and every little bit counts when it comes to such things.

Then, the dementors come.

***

Chapter End Notes

As a small thank you to all the lovely comments, an extra snippet💜

Chapter 30: Marvolo interlude

Chapter Notes

> Again, a small snippet as a thank you for all the lovely comments. I'm not at home, I'm on a mountain so I have a lot of time to write but only the internet on my phone. I'm much too old to feel comfortable for too long on my phone so that's why I'm not replying to you all lovely things and am instead feeding you bits.
> I won't leave you hanging for long dears💜

Once, when he was still in the orphanage, unaware of his powers or the truth of the world, Marvolo was taken to a muggle carnival. Most of the so-called attractions have long since escaped his memory, but the House of Mirrors remained. Seeing his reflection distorted this way and that was a powerful metaphor for a five-year-old Marvolo. It explained what he had always felt was true—that his body might look similar to that of the other people, but inside he was far, far different from them.

He was correct about that.

Watching young Black Heir, he is struck with an amusing, if unwelcome reminder of those simple optical tricks. Watching young Black Heir feels like he is watching a distorted and nearly unrecognisable image of himself. Almost, but not fully inverted.

Marvolo has an opposite, and his name is Albus Dumbledore. Their magic, mind, values and methods were so perfectly misaligned, that they almost cancelled each other out. They were destined to be enemies far more than the fool ever had with his lover. Young Sirius Black, however, is not Marvolo's opposite, he's the flip side of his coin. The boy is Dark, monumentally so. He is cruel, vicious and wild. He is passionate and brave. If Marvolo is honest, which he tends to be with himself, he can recognise the boy is, in most ways, a perfected version of him. He is braver, richer, cleverer, more beautiful—He is the type of person young Marvolo would have killed by any means necessary.

And he admires Marvolo. Is wary of him, respectful in a way that a young cub might be of the leader of a pack. If he is not very mistaken—which he rarely is—Marvolo is about the only adult the little monster does respect. Oh, he has his goals and dreams and whatnot. He is

obsessed with his little brother to an extent that Marvolo hasn't observed in life or print, distantly but genuinely fond of his family and the flock of children from all around that he's taken to collecting, and vaguely interested in England as a whole, but he isn't afraid of much, and there is no real respect without fear.

Why is he afraid of Marvolo, however? He certainly never gave the boy any reason to be. He scoured the minds of anyone and everyone who could have told the boy and found nothing. How did the boy sniff out the danger?

He drums his fingers into his thigh bone. Polyjuice doesn't agree with him; never has. It's not vanity, whatever people might think. He enjoys going about under a small glamour, when work allows, to see the world and remind himself just how subjective it all is. No, the problem with Polyjuice is only that he must, then, keep his magic under wraps, and that makes him irritable and prone to overreactions. Overreacting in a trial presided by Zadzisai is not a good idea.

Black continues playing games with the Prosecutors—useless Ministry ghouls—and Marvolo continues trying to make sense of him.

Is it a creature inheritance? Marvolo's horocrux rituals made him sensitive to such things. From the moment he laid eyes on the boy, all of nine years old and covered with another man's blood, he knew there was something off about him. He moved too dangerously and spoke too cleverly. Age shone behind the Black-grey eyes, magic cool like poison, wrapped around the boy in a defensive clench. The boy's Patronus only confirmed what he already knew. There is power—Marvolo has plenty of it himself—and then there's *something else*. Whatever Sirius Black is—

Walburga tells some nonsense story about a ritual and he swallows a sneer. Why does she even bother? Everybody who spent a day researching arcane rituals knows—

He happens to catch Black's eyes at just the right time to spot the shock, the realisation and the amusement. Marvolo wasn't what one would call a natural legilimens but he is a powerful empath. He might be too far away from Black to know for certain, but—

The boy believes it. Believes it, is amused by it, and is using his amusement to spin it.

Marvolo feels a twinge of respect, among other things. If Black believes it—Well, it would explain a lot of things. Why the boy never felt like a boy. Why there were so many mysteries swirling around him. Why he was so very *other*.

Perhaps, his initial metaphor has more weight than he thought. If the boy is, somehow, a banished soul summoned to a human body, then the difference between *him* and the baseline magical is about as considerable as the difference between a wizard and a muggle.

As if ordered by the Gods themselves, the boy's efforts at public relations management are undercut by, what he can only imagine, is a delicious Ministerial fumble. He is almost tempted to track down those responsible and send them a gift, in the few hours they still have. Marvolo hadn't had Blacks, before. Walburga and Orion, yes, but Arcturus mistrusted him, sensing, possibly, his utter lack of commitment to the stated cause. Now—

Well, well. Either the boy dies—supremely unlikely—or he lives, but either way, House Black and the impressive list of allies they've amassed over the past years will burn through the ministry like so much dry kindling. He wins, either way.

Drums of war echo in his mind. That is not, in itself, rare, but now they sound *eager*.

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

And phew. Okay a small break after this. I need to write something else for a bit. Phew!

TW: violence, injuries, pain etc.
Xx

Judge Zadzisai, Itachi notes with the little vestige of good humour left to him, looks about as done in as he feels. He can't blame her. He's run the gamut of feelings, hasn't he? From numb wariness, over cynicism, all the way round to amusement. He doesn't have much left.

Nobody else appears to, either. The Wizengamot Lords and Ladies look to be counting down the minutes until they can leave; some out of exhaustion, some to spread the gossip. The fate of one Walburga Black seems to be the furthest thing from anybody's mind.

Itachi doesn't look at his mother. It's ironic, delightfully so. He is one of the few, if not the only one, who knows she was fully honest. Walburga Black, whatever else could be said about her, lived her life according to her philosophy. All her life, she worked to trample him into irrelevance, and with every step, she propelled him into the spotlight. Even now, at the trial where she really should be the focus of attention, she's but an irritating footnote; a framing device for the story everybody wants to hear.

To add another layer of irony, she'd have had a better go at it in a Muggle court. Many of the thinkers Reg is particularly fond of are, in turn, particularly fond of legal theory and systems of justice. If the practice is at all similar to the theory, Walburga could well have walked away from all this a free woman. In this particular case, Itachi will readily admit that she doesn't deserve what the Judge will declare.

To Itachi's utter lack of surprise, the voting body follows the script that had been completed after money, favours and threats finished changing hands. Two-thirds for *guilty,* one-sixth for *not guilty* and the rest are undecided. Shocking.

“Very well. The accused is hereby declared guilty. As I am not an elected member of the English Courts, I am bound to follow the sentencing guidelines as set by this body. With that in mind, I sentence you, Walburga Black, nee Black, to ten years in the lowest security wing in Azkaban prison. Guards—

He shuts his mind off from the yammering from the Wizengamot, the wall of light coming from hundreds of cameras from the public section, or the Arguers talking to Walburga under their breaths. It’s over, finally. The Aurors approach Walburga—

Something strange tingles in Itachi, some far-away instinct, drilled into his soul. Is it instinct? He feels—

His muscles tense, magic condensing. His wand pulses on his wrist. Dread closes around his heart and throat, doom boils in his blood. He can hear *screaming*—

Things happen a little too fast, for all that it takes less than a second. He flies out of his seat, magic-quick, entirely by instinct. Onlookers shout. Regulus—Danger—Death—Corruption—

He bounces off the magical barrier. Zadzisai is yelling, now. He hisses out a curse, Chikyūgo falling from his lips. The barrier. She had said—Whatever is happening has triggered the defences. He should’ve stayed in his bubble. He should’ve—

His eyes are burning, heart thudding against his ribs. Why is he panicking? He’s trained for this. He’s—Focus, Shinobi. Think—Move—What is *happening*—

Spells fly at the barrier. Some are absorbed by it, others ricochet and hit others. The shouting turns panicked. Regulus is in there—Adrenaline pumps into his veins, making his head spin. Regulus is—

—*Someone is screaming*—

Kreacher's tiny body bounces off the barrier.

"No, Kreacher, stop. Go to Regulus. *Keep him safe."*

He disappears. A dollop of insanity vanishes. Kreacher will keep Regulus safe. And—Grandfather is there, and Aunt Cassie and Bellatrix and—Garnall is there too—They will—They can—

His stomach rolls, then clenches, vision growing blurry. His heart is starting to make mistakes, and skip beats; he can almost feel it flagging. What is--

—*Someone is screaming*—

A pulse of dread bursts in his chest and he backs away from the incoming threat as far as he can go. It's not far. There is no defensible position he can retreat to; he's in a round room. He looks around wildly. He can barely make out individual humans behind their ward-barriers. Walburga, the pair of Aurors and her Arguers are in one of theirs. Zadzisai is trying to tell him something from behind her bubble. He can vaguely hear her voice, as if from a great distance.

—*Someone is screaming*—

Everybody is trying to tell him something. He crouches down and redistributes the weight. One hand clenches on his wand, the other one reaches for his most dangerous knife—the cursed one that he hoped he would never have to use. Something is coming. The air tastes of ice and death. Stillness. Hairs stand on end, as he tries to calm himself a little; do something about the weight crushing his lungs. If he dared look away from *whatever it was,* he thinks he'd be checking if the sweat on his palms had frozen solid.

—*Someone is screaming*—

He shakes his head twice and pulses his Chakra—No, his magic? He pulses his *magic* through his body. Who is screaming? It can't be the people, there's not enough of them. It would take—Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands—It would take *civilisations,* to produce a sound like this. That aside, these aren't cries of fear or pain. This is anguish; this is the wail of a mother who ran into the flames to find her child crushed in the rubble. This is—

—*Someone is screaming*—

Enough! Look—*Things* fly towards him. They, unlike the puny humans, aren't much bothered by the magical barriers. There is perhaps a hundred meters between them and him: the length of the staircase they're flying down. They're coming right at him.

His hand tightens on his wand, as his mind shrieks in protest. Zadzisai is yelling something. Everybody is yelling something. He watches the *things* approaching and can't think of a single thing to do.

When in doubt, fire. Flames of Amaterasu sound like just the thing.

His eyes hurt, bile stinging his throat. He bites his cheek, takes heart in the familiar taste of blood, and tries to think of an incantation for an appropriately unstoppable inferno. They might all perish, but—Wait, no—

"Dementors, 'Tachi!" Regulus' amplified voice roars over the room, just loud enough to be heard over the *screaming*. "*Cast your Patronus!"*

Ah. Right. He can do that.

Susanō roars into life around him. Suddenly, he doesn't feel so cold. Suddenly, he doesn't feel the manic need to back away from the monsters.

Who is screaming?

The more magic he pours into the Susanō, the more solid it becomes. The off-blue conjuration shifts into a copper-red. The flying *things* slow down some, but advance, confident.

Itachi's head doesn't clear, but it cools down, in direct contrast to his body which is finally shaking off the clutch of ice. What—He knows this. He knows this taste of—It's not *death*, no. Death is a natural thing. All that lives, dies. This wrong stillness, this alien calamity of *cold* and *not* and—

Kaguya. It's a sinkhole, it's a stillness and a lack and—

Kaguya. *Kaguya*? Alright. A Sword of Totsuka whooshes into his Susanō's hand, a shield appearing in the other. Itachi feels a grin stretch his lips. He can barely see anything, and he's well past hearing. Go ahead, he thinks. Try me. I have fought with less and won. You think I need sight? *Please.*

What are they screaming?

They are almost here. For all that they seem capable of passing through the barriers, they aren't eager to do so. Must be all the Patroni, trapped inside with their casters. Useful; it created a bottleneck. Getting surrounded doesn't sound like a good time. Plus—It means Regulus is safe.

The first three are a handful of paces away. Itachi grits his teeth and tries to focus his struggling eyes—

Either Itachi's mind is breaking down from stress, or they are shifting shapes. No, not shifting. Two images are superimposed over one another. One is of a black-hooded spectre and the other is—His mind shrieks, sending urgent bolts of pain to warn him against this attempt. He can't internalise the image, can't comprehend it. It's not a—It's a—

His eyes ache, lights flashing between patches of black. Sweat pours down his neck. Bit by bit, the shape of his vision alters, as his mind does *something*—A feeling not unlike a spring releasing lashes across his consciousness, and a sharp, pained scream rips from his throat. His knees lock to keep him upright, body fighting through the nauseating agony, but—His vision sharpens. Making sense of what he's seeing is out of the question, but he is seeing something. They're absences, he thinks wildly. Absence of a being given temporary form. It's morphing, slithering across reality like oil on water, but the only thing that remains constant is the pitch-black not-mouth. No, not black. Eigengrau. Visual noise. They *can't* be physical. They *can't* be possible.

Never mind that. How many are there? Two-four-six-nine-ten.

Ten. Doable.

"I love you, Reg," he says, just in case someone can hear him over all the *screaming.* He focuses on his Susanō. It feels like an extension of him; like a set of limbs he has suddenly become aware of. No wonder; he's poured so much of his Chakra into the thing, it practically *is* him. Or something. His head throbs.

Staying still is for amateurs. He was trained by the best, wasn't he? The son of Konoha's Red Death will not stand still and wait for his enemies to approach like some sort of dumb samurai.

Keeping track of his bodies is a bit of an experience, but it's simple enough now that he got the hang of his sight. He's got enough Chakra left to run circles around these Kaguya knockoffs. Now, the important thing is to keep his perspectives in line, and—

He lunges, exploding from the ground, quick and mean enough to do his mother justice. The Uchiha traditionally use the Interceptor Kenjutsu forms, but Mikoto mixed Hatake Moon and Sun forms with Uchiha Catspaw Taijutsu. Meaning, if you know what you are doing, you only ever need to strike once.

Alright, he thinks, falling back. So that's what a monster looks like when it's dying. It's not any more or less possible than anything else that's happening. The aberration stretches and shrinks, emitting a fractured sound, but—It does die, leaving behind a patch of reality that, somehow, appears relieved. Alright—

Energy flows into his Susanō, which is not him, precisely, except in all the ways it is. Dizziness hits again, this time coupled with an intoxicating feeling of euphoria. The other nine things hesitate in their approach, which lets Itachi settle more comfortably into his ever-strengthening Sunsanō. His head feels like it's minutes away from splitting down the middle, possibly to let the heat escape. On the other hand, he's *bursting* with Chakra.

What the fuck is going on?

The small part of his brain somewhat aware of reality is about to give up, but he's got enough presence of mind for one final certainty. His one chance now is to fall back on his training. On his reflexes. He can barely see, much less think; he's got a pack of monsters here, and they will go after Reggie if he dies. He needs to—

Two monsters float closer, moving at a speed he hasn't yet seen from them. Cute. You call this an ambush? His body moves without any conscious effort, like he's floating, pulled by strings held by long-dead teachers. Hound-Taicho makes sure his footwork is clean and efficient; Fox gentles the line of his spine; Butterfly gathers the Chakra in his shoulders and arms—

Double vision explodes in his mind. One grey and blurry, the other blade-sharp and about as pleasant. Two monsters are dead, sliced clean through—

—The Sharingan—The Sharingan—The Sharingan—

He cuts through three more before they have a chance to react, flips back with one body and crouches with the other one.

Fear loses all meaning. Most emotions fade into the back, leaving only focus and a terrible, starving hunger. In the back of his mind, he knows exactly what these monsters are and that they aren't anywhere *near* his match. Screams of the fallen flow into him, and they are his strength too. They are where they should be, now, as is he—

The shield is rather unnecessary. It flickers and becomes a wakizashi. He shifts his feet, distributes his feet properly, and raises them in the air, giving a fond thought to Mikoto. She would have loved this.

A curl of despair tries to wrap around him; he barks a laugh. “You would try to trap me with fear? *Me?* How foolish.” Even his voice sounds off, hollow and inorganic. Inhuman in the way of instruments.

Seventh and eighth monsters die, relinquishing their trapped energy to the rightful recipient. The last two try to run, the wretched errors that they are. Oily, slimy *filth*—

Itachi has two swords and two escaping enemies. Pursuit is—not an ideal prospect, considering he’s not all that sure he can fit in that small stairway. So—

He launches the blade, nailing the vermin to the floor. Bits of stone fly, and the shrieks—

Who cares about the shrieks? His mission is over, which means Regulus is safe, now. So—

Where is Regulus?—Why is everything so tiny—He can see their Chakra clearly enough, gorgeous flames of human souls, bright and flickering—He could—If he only reached out—If he just—

Something snaps inside of him. Itachi wobbles. His senses are glitching again. He’s—Ah, the Sharingan is off. Alright. He’s shaking like a leaf. Not ideal. His head throbs, he can’t feel his body much and tears run down his face. He licks—Ah. Tears of blood again? How dramatic.

He sways, knees locking at the last moment. The wailing and shrieking still ring in his head, but it’s not as agonised as before. Unbearable but he can, of course, bear it. His ears are bleeding too, most likely. Something is leaking down his neck.

“*R e g u l u s !*”

Okay, that was louder than it was necessary. Or it could be his damaged ear drums. His ears *are* bleeding. Still, it's almost pleasant; the sound of innumerable clay flutes, flowing together. He always loved those, so that's possibly why his mind is feeding it back to him. A reassurance of sorts? Stranger things have happened.

Focus.

His Susanō twists with him, as he spins around, trying to find—He can't see but he can feel the pull of Reg's magic. There—He slams into the barrier—Did you forget about the cursed *barrier—*

"*Are you okay*? R E G U L U S!" The stone shudders around him. His mind wobbles, expanding and fracturing—Why isn't he answering? His magic is right there. Why isn't he—

"*Safe Siri,"* comes the amplified voice again. Itachi relaxes a little. "*I'm safe. They're tearing down the barriers. We'll be out in less than two minutes. Are you—"*

Itachi sways. The smell of burning flesh and bone is becoming harder to ignore. He looks down. Ah. The strange mess of blackened bone warped around the steaming, superheated stone inlay is all that remained of his hand and the wand, apparently. The delicate finger bones fused together, forming a rather interesting shape.

"Good. That's good." His Susanō is still there. He should think about dismissing him, only —"Sorry, I'm—A bit out of sorts. I can't see all that well."

The immediate danger is past. Why is his heart still racing? Why does his skin feel like it's going to burst at any moment? Why does he feel the urge to throw his head back and scream the world back into nothingness?

Why are they screaming?

Who is screaming? Who are they? Where are they?

Alright, so based on what you know about Dementors—

“Reg, if you can hear me, I need you to go to Castle Black and stay there with Garnall. Or with Aunt Dorea, or somewhere, because it’s not safe for you here.” The white spots in his vision are about to swallow the final blobs of blurry grey. “We’re not through yet.” His Susanō flickers, and he doubles over, throat clenching around a scream. “Judge Zadzisai, I have a lot of foreign magic in me that wants to go out. It will do that if I let it, or if it rips free from my smoking corpse. Either way, it’s best that not happen here.”

How he’s still standing is beyond him.

“—Black—Hear me?”

Who? Judge—

There is not much he can do to focus, but he tries his best. He’s keeping himself alive mostly by focusing very hard on believing none of this is real. n.

“I can hear you a little.” He swallows. The iron soothes him. “A handy portkey to a remote area nobody will miss sounds just like just the thing.”

“—Touch you?”

He thinks about this.

“Best not try,” he says, honestly. “Throw it at me.”

He catches the portkey with his Susanō hand because that's a thing that can happen.

"Portus."

Releasing an uncountable number of tortured souls is, apparently, a skill you just *have.* Itachi is curled into a low bow, one hand digging into the sand, the other one flopped to the side uselessly. Hot or not, the sand feels heavenly on his face, after all that void-coldness.

He would throw up if he wasn't vomiting souls.

Some time passes. Sun is going down by the time he flops over, spent. He will probably die, he thinks blearily. People aren't meant to survive being this drained of energy. His heart is slowing down; the sounds stretch and fold.

A gust of wind blows, bringing with it an odd taste of salt and the sea. Huh. And here he thought they brought him to a desert.

He does wake up. He is a little shocked by this. He wakes up and feels fine. Drugged, then. Lovely. He eyes the ceiling. Not Castle Black. Maybe it's a part of Mungo's he doesn't know? Hmm.

Reggie is sleeping next to him. Itachi's hand twitches. One hand. The other one—Best not think about that.

An alarm rings.

Itachi blinks stupidly as the room explodes into motion. Reg jerks from sleep, and several people run inside. Garnall, okay; Grandfather, makes sense. Judge Zadzisai? What—Two people, a man and a woman—

“‘Tachi,” Reg sobs, burying himself into his chest.

Itachi blinks again. “Reggie-bug,” he says. He might be feeling fine, more or less, but his thoughts are slow. Muted. “Sorry I worried you.” Good. “I don’t understand what happened.” True.

“You—” Reg curls into him further, settling in a way that suggests he might never move. “You did good, ‘Tachi.”

The love warms him. He blinks. The adults are talking at him; he can see their lips move. An apologetic look will have to do. “Sorry,” he says. “I can’t hear you. I might be falling asleep.”

“Sleep, ‘Tachi,” Reg says.

Itachi nods. “Okay.”

Chapter 32

Waking up for more than a couple of moments takes a while. He can't quite pinpoint why. He feels—All of him there *is* feels alright. True, there's some less of him, quite possibly, but that's not all that important. He's ambidextrous, anyway.

Reggie and Kreacher are there, every time he wakes. Itachi hadn't had the chance to properly question them about how their experience. He hadn't had the chance to properly question himself, either. The whole thing feels distinctly like a dream.

Another thing that is up in the air is where, precisely, they are. Wherever it is, it's more progressive than Castle Black. His badgers are not only allowed to visit but they do so often enough to catch several of Itachi's waking moments, which he fears are pretty infrequent. Frank is another frequent familiar face. James, of course, is second only to Reggie. Grandfather, Uncle Alphard and Daigo-sama, Aunt Dorea, and even the LeStranges. Fawkes has an advantage, in that Itachi can hear him even in his sleep.

He is rather touched. A little guilty, perhaps, but it's difficult to summon up any intense emotion when he's this floaty. He had amassed so many people that care about him, it's a little stunning.

But—on and on he sleeps.

He wakes up, this time rather more violently than the rest, to find himself in a circular, cave-like chamber. It's all the stone, he thinks blearily. Not a trace of wood or metal or even muggle plastics. Surprisingly, he's laying in a shallow pool of some sort of liquid, one width of a finger deep perhaps.

Judging by past experiences, he won't be awake for long, so it would be good if he could collect as much information as he can. Moving is supremely difficult, but he manages to crane his head to the side. The water sloshes into his ear. It tingles. Alright, not water, then.

Lord Marvolo Riddle.

Itachi blinks. Looks at the man, who looks back with a calm intensity that makes him want to show his neck immediately. Alright.

He turns his head some more. Grandfather.

Strange, but encouraging. Grandfather doesn't look kidnapped or injured, so he probably bribed Lord Riddle somehow.

Sleep trickles in, threatening to pull him down. Focus!

He heaves his head to the opposite side. It hits the stone rather painfully. Through the sleepiness and dizziness, he thinks he spots—Headmaster Dumbledore? He's the only one who would wear that shade of magenta. Plus, there's Fawkes. He suspects there are several more people that he can't see.

He is beginning to think he might be in a ritual of some sort. Alright.

He turns back to the ceiling. His magic has been behaving oddly since this whole thing began. He's spending all of it, somehow. It's doing *something*, but what—

"If you spent all of Reggie's inheritance for bribes, we will have words," he says, expecting he will fall to sleep any second now.

"Brace yourself, Grandson," Grandfather says. "I don't expect this will be pleasant."

Mm.

“Fawkes is here,” he says. He’s been awake for so long! “Plus Lord Riddle will knock me out if I scream too long. It’s fine. Have at it.”

“By all means, let us begin,” says an unfamiliar voice. Female, rough and grating. Not human.

Whatever he was expecting it wasn’t the magical equivalent of a Chakra transfusion. A very misaligned Chakra transfusion, too. His spine bends back, lungs trying to expand and collapse in tandem, as the fiery-cold light magic pours into him—

It’s doused by a second stream, comforting. Familiar. He relaxes. Grandfather.

The pattern repeats, light and dark, torturing and healing him until it’s just the two left.

“Brace yourself.”

Itachi, barely little more than a pile of sweat and misery, has to smile. “Thank you, Lord Riddle,” he croaks. “One does what one can.”

The second to last stream of magic is the most potent one yet. Headmaster. The shriek that rips from Itachi’s throat damages something. His body seizes, nerves screaming. After several long moments, he thinks—Do I need to be here for this? His mind starts to seep away, but Fawkes’ piercing trill yanks it back. He hisses. Fawkes’ song turns domineering. Itachi surrenders. Alright then.

After a small eternity of pain, it’s Lord Riddle’s turn. Itachi groans and shudders through it. It’s not the volume. It’s not *just* the volume. Both Lords have impeccable control. It’s the density of it, the purity. If he was a smidge less self-conscious, he’d moan. Itachi never was what one would call a carnal being, but this magic makes a compelling case as to why he might consider becoming one. Especially after the oversensitized nerves left behind by the Headmaster, Lord Riddle’s magic feels, well, orgasmic.

Not that it's any less torturous to bear. A mind will break under overwhelming pleasure every bit as easily as it would with pain. Even easier, because it was difficult to build up an immunity to it. He most certainly had not. Tears run down his face as the relieved groans turn to gasps, then to shrieks; first muffled, then not. Fawkes resumes pulling him back, after that.

"Now us."

He doesn't even have it in him to sob, but the magic that flows into him feels like—nothing at all. Clear, odourless, tasteless energy. He doesn't relax, because it doesn't feel like anything. He's still perfectly miserable, crying and shivering.

"And—together."

He blacks out.

He wakes up. He doesn't feel fine. This, he thinks through the initial wave of pain, can only be a good thing.

Reggie is there. He looks terrible.

"Hey, little brother," he says through a mouth stiff from pain. "So that sucked."

"I imagine so."

Itachi squints at the tense tone. Immediately, Reggie's face softens. "Ignore my nonsense," he says. "I am cross. I told them you can take it, and they let you waste away for *weeks*. I told them you aren't getting better, and they yammered on about regaining your strength. Idiots."

Itachi nods obediently. They are idiots if Reggie says they're idiots. "Adults can be stubborn about the strangest things." Fuck but it hurts. He feels like all of his blood vessels have been ripped out and meticulously replaced with tiny tubes of sandpaper. Or maybe hydrochloric acid. "They should have listened to you."

Regulus smiles, small and mean. "I made them listen. Don't worry, 'Tachi, it's all going to be okay, now. You overdid it, but you hadn't had many options."

Itachi goes for a shrug and aborts it immediately. "I don't know that I had a lot of options at all. It was a very strange experience."

"We can definitely agree on that." Regulus bends down and presses a gentle kiss to his forehead. Itachi wholly melts. "It was—well, terrifying yeah, but so cool, you have no idea. Did you learn to—*Before*?"

"Probably." He carefully steers his mind away from those memories, aware on some level that he's not ready to go there. "Did I hallucinate, or did Headmaster Dumbledore and Lord Marvolo Riddle perform a magical ritual on me?"

"They did." Reg's eyes spark meanly. "And also Grandfather, Lord Potter, Aunt Dorea, Judge Zadzisai, Aunt Cassie, Lady Longbottom, Kolya, Garnall, Lyosha, Lady Corvi, Cousin Bella, Auror Shacklebolt and Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel."

Itachi blinks.

"We are currently," continues Regulus, "in a chateau owned by the ICW. In France."

Itachi blinks again. "I am really famous again, aren't I?"

"You have *no idea."*

“Seven pairs of light and dark,” he says, unwilling to even entertain the political side of this. “I get that. Why the Flamels?”

“They are Neutral,” Reg says. “Also, Dwarves. *Also*, they kept you alive through the first bit.”

Itachi’s heat throbs a warning.

“Let’s change the topic,” he says, squinting through the pain. “My kids were here, weren’t they?”

“Mm. Do you know that everybody treats me as your caretaker, effectively?”

Itachi considers this. “Appropriate.”

Regulus smiles, thin and unamused. “Rather. Well, the short version is that Lady Perenelle determined it was good for you to be around magic of the people you care about. After that—Well. I insisted. Nobody dared go against me, for fear of what you will do to them if you woke up. When Fawkes flamed over with your badgers, the matter was settled.”

Itachi—doesn’t know what to say about this. “How long—”

“Eleven weeks,” Regulus says. “And *still,* I had to ask Lord Riddle myself—”

“You *what?”* Itachi doubles over or tries to. His muscles are basically non-existent.

“Calm down,” Regulus says, long-suffering. “He was perfectly polite. You’ve made yourself the most valuable commodity in the world, and Lord Riddle is, among other things, a politician.”

Itachi breathes quietly for a long minute. “How did you even *get* him?”

“Ah.” Reg has the good sense to look mildly ashamed but also awed. “That was interesting. I went to the Headmaster. He is rather brilliant, isn’t he?”

Itachi squints. “Headmaster Dumbledore? Absolutely. Kind too.” He remembers the torrent of magic coming into him. “Wait. I’m confused. At what point did Lord Riddle even enter into it?”

“Kreacher and I heard talk about a ritual,” Regulus’ eyes flash silver, a physical manifestation of magic that Itachi doesn’t see often on him. “They said it was too risky. Too dangerous and painful. That you would snap. Possibly die. This was *weeks* ago.”

“That much I understood.”

“The—the ritual is meant to—”

“We can skip that part,” Itachi says hurriedly. At Reg’s heavy look, he shrugs and winces. “I’m not—I’m keeping away from all that. My mind is still—soft. Vulnerable.”

“Right.” Regulus kisses him on the forehead again. “The requirements for the ritual,” he continues smoothly, “are seven pairs of witches or wizards, with equal but opposite magic, thereabout. They did not have a match for the Headmaster, or, rather, they were pretending not to have one. It didn’t matter, of course, because they weren’t seriously considering it, either.”

“Who is ‘they’ again?”

“ICW,” Reg says, waving a dismissive hand. “The Flamels, Grandfather, the lot of them. Fools to the last one. After some weeks, I concluded they meant to give you a heavily potioned and slow death because they would have done something by then otherwise. Kreacher then took me to the Headmaster, I explained what was happening, and his phoenix agreed to take me to Lord Riddle.”

Itachi’s heart skips again. “*Unannounced?!”*

Regulus rolls his eyes. “I sent a note asking if he would see me, ‘Tachi, I’m not an animal.”

Merciful Lady. “And you explained—What precisely?”

Reg shrugs again. The casual gesture doesn’t do much with how stress and worry had chiselled his young face into hard lines. For all his attempts to play it down, Reggie could pass for an ANBU right now. “We needed his help for a ritual to save your life. He didn’t ask many questions.”

“*Riddle?!”*

“Calm down, seriously. Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel bathed you in the Elixir of Life, Lord Riddle isn’t even on the list of your top concerns.”

Itachi runs that sentence in his head once, twice, three times. “They. They bathed me. In the Elixir of Life.”

“The current consensus on Earth is that keeping you alive is worth anything and everything,” Reg says with a dead smile. “We didn’t even have to ask, the Flamels offered.”

Itachi swallows. They’re edging into the forbidden category. “Okay. Where is everybody?”

“Kreacher is trailing Perenelle Flamel. She’s gathering ingredients for the potions you’re taking, and we’re not very comfortable relying on—anyone, really. Grandfather is politicking as is every other Black over the age of majority.” Reg’s smile grows a shade of humanity. “Garnall and his team are in front. Your badgers and their families have been staying here, after—They have been staying here. They are unharmed.”

Itachi swallows.

“I think I need to sleep a bit,” he says, after a long moment. “I—” He swallows again. Tears are beading in his eyes and something tells him they are likely to become red unless he stops—Whatever it is he’s doing.

“Probably.” Reg sighs, lips passing. “Sorry. I should have insisted already. I was—Never mind. Sleep. I will be there when you wake up.”

Reg must have passed on Itachi’s wishes that he would rather not think about everything that happened because the first serious talk he needs to have is about his hand.

“There is nothing we can do,” explains Grandfather, looking at him with exhausted, wary eyes. Behind him, Perenelle and Nicholas Flamel—the only Dwarves he’s seen in this life or the previous—study him like he’s a clump of cells underneath a microscope. “The core fused with your body. Even if we amputated it at the wrist, the magical connection is broken. We can’t re-grow it.

Itachi watches the strange, blackened construction at the end of his arm. “It doesn’t hurt,” he says wonderingly.

“There are no nerves left,” Lady Flamel says briskly. “There is nothing to hurt.”

Itachi moves it around a little.

“Fascinating.” He turns to Reg. “It’s rather pretty, isn’t it? In a macabre way.”

A shadow of a smile appears on Reg’s face. “I think so. It works with your aesthetic. Very chic.”

“I think so too—A petrified skeletal hand clutching remains of a wand—It’s all very poetic, isn’t it?” He turns back to Grandfather and Flamels. “Is it dangerous? Do we have to remove it?”

“I shouldn’t think it’s dangerous,” Grandfather says slowly. “Everything, ah. Everything else was re-grown. I am not the expert, however.”

“You might want to sand it down some,” Lord Flamel says, strange eyes shining. Dwarves, Itachi is learning, either don’t have sclera or their irises are too big to be seen. Their eyes are also, crucially, pitch-black. “But removing it would be easier said than done. Unless it messes with your casting, we should leave it for now.”

Itachi’s mind twinges a warning. He swallows. “Alright, so let’s shelve that for now. Any other things I should know about?”

“I wanted to re-grow your eyes,” Lady Flamel says in a matter-of-fact voice. “But we decided not to in the end. Something is happening there that we don’t understand. Until we do, it’s not worth the Hellfire the Dragon throne will rain down on our heads if we damage you further.”

He aggressively ignores the implications of that statement and looks at Regulus. “Reg?”

“You are *very* famous, Tachi. The only way we had to keep the Japanese and the Chinese back was to play them against each other. That’s not to say the rest of the world isn’t—But, but that doesn’t matter right now. What matters is that you get better.”

Right.

“I can’t—” He’s becoming confused again. Confused and overwhelmed. There is an enormity of information and knowledge in his mind that looms, and he knows he is not ready to tackle it. “You understand, yes? Why I’m—”

“I would be more concerned if you were completely fine,” Reg replies. The determination on his face breaks Itachi’s heart. Again and again, they thrust adult responsibilities on the shoulders of a nine-year-old boy. These days, talking to Reg was, beat for beat, like talking to an adult. “Take all the time you need. Nobody will dare cross that very reasonable boundary.”

“I will work on it, I promise. Just—” The shaky peace in his mind cracks further. “I need time.”

“And you have it.”

James is there when he wakes up, some sixteen hours later. He looks—

“James, dear, are you—”

“Perfectly fine, ducky,” says the drawn, skinny version of his cousin. “Right as rain. You look—You look better.”

Itachi snorts, determinedly yanking his mind into safe, harmless waters. “I look like a wraith, let’s not lie. I haven’t been this out of shape—” He shrugs, the movement taking more effort than it should. “All very true to form, I suspect. I even have a beautifully ghoulish accessory, now.”

He shakes his skeleton hand pointedly. James blinks, face free from all expression.

“Too soon?”

With a disbelieving shake of the head, James’ lips curve to the side, tense shoulders relaxing somewhat. “You are an actual nightmare, do you know that? The actual worst.”

“I mean, that’s definitely true.” He shrugs again and shakes his arm. “But I also have a claw now, which is amazing no matter how you look at it.”

James makes a cure *hrrk* noise, which soon turns into a strangled chuckle, then a real laugh. Soon enough, he’s doubled over, sun-bright laughter bouncing off the walls. A part of Itachi’s bleeding psyche scabs over. Fawkes is amazing, yes, but James is James.

“I missed you,” he says, eyes shiny with tears. Optimistically, Itachi would like to call them laugh-tears, but chances are it’s a mix at best. “So much.”

“The same is, of course, true. Things have been—” His mind twinges sharply. He winces. “I don’t suppose you talked to Reg about—”

“If you think your Hellhound let anyone approach without explaining the terrors that will befall them should they upset you, you are more confused than you look.” James’ smile dims. “Which is fair. The last thing I want to do is to upset you. Yeah.”

Itachi re-settles his shoulders. He’s in uncharted territory here. Soothing his kids is his primary directive, but he can’t soothe James without falling into memories that might actually kill him if he doesn’t approach them with care. Which will, in turn, only upset his kids *more*.

“Where are you staying these days? The Rook?”

James shakes off the melancholy a bit. “Here, mostly. Most of us are. Aunt Dorea—Doesn’t matter. Your badgers and I have been staying here from day one. It’s great, I won’t lie. Novembers in Scotland are dreary at best.”

November, Amaterasu wept. It was September when he—

Abort! Abort!

“Have you worked on our play, now that you have some time to rest and relax,” he says, a little desperately. Mania sparks up and down his voice, sharpening his r’s and rounding out his o’s.

“Our—What—” James blinks, tilts his head and blinks again. “Our *play?”*

Itachi nods firmly. “We spoke about it. I distinctly remember thinking about renting out the Bacchus theatre for us—”

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

James doesn't stay too long because Itachi can't stay awake for too long. Whatever happened to his body left him weak and trembling and feeling very much like a newborn. Very nostalgic.

"One upside," Regulus says when Itachi next wakes up, "is that all your *other* issues have been fixed."

Itachi blinks. "By other issues, you mean—"

"Your heart, lungs and what can only be described as an endocrinologist's worst nightmare, yes. Elixir of life, etcetera, etcetera. You will probably start growing, now. Properly, I mean."

Huh. "That *is* good news." He looks at his stick-thin body. "Are you sure?"

Reg rolls his eyes. "I don't know how to explain the volume of healers around the world working on your case. Next to none of them have access to you, nor will they get it, but they receive live updates about your condition."

Yikes. Itachi exhales a long breath. "Okay. So, that's one of the worst things I've ever heard."

"I don't know," Reg says, the maniacal glint in his eyes very close to the surface, "I kind of like it. The world has finally caught up on how things should be."

Uh-huh. Itachi's mind twinges.

“In more good news, a team of researchers figured out a way to let you keep the claw,” Reg continues. “I’m waiting for the final okay from the usual control channels, but it’s looking promising.”

Itachi chances a look at his right arm. Lady Flamel has taken to keeping a sphere of the Elixir of Life around it at all times, up to his elbow, and, yeah. It’s not looking great. The hand itself is fine; a claw made out of bone and stone. But the organic part connecting to it keeps dying, which means they keep reviving it, and yeah. It’s not a very efficient system.

“The usual control channels being—”

“The Headmaster and Lord Riddle,” Reg says with a straight face. Like it’s a completely normal thing to just *say.*

“What?”

“Calm down, it’s fine. As I said, they both want to keep you alive come what may.”

What did he *do*—A gasp of pain escapes his throat as he clenches his eyes shut, heart stuttering. Right.

“Itachi? *Itachi—”*

*“*Fine, fine,” he grits out. “Just—Poked myself in the trauma I guess. Nothing to worry about.”

Reg’s face could be chiselled from stone with how expressive it is. Not for the first time, Itachi spends a long moment lamenting the cost this whole mess had on his precious baby brother. Gone are the round cheeks and rosy, healthy flush of his skin. He is all hard planes now. He grew, too, which is concerning. He could very well pass for a child prodigy back in Konoha.

When he's better, he's going to have a long talk with Regulus about what he has been doing to himself. Itachi knows first-hand that children don't develop this quickly without extensive support. In Konoha, a specialised team of Uchiha medics worked full-time to make his pace of development possible. And here—Here, Reg has access to the best minds and most state-of-the-art magic, even if he has to sneak around to get it.

Not now. There are still far too many ominous silences, things nobody dares to bring up lest he panics and wrecks the delicate web of magic keeping him alive. Not now, but soon.

"You were saying about the claw?"

Reg's lips twitch into a humourless smile, but he allows the redirection. Itachi is allowed most things, these days. "They want to fuse your wrist with a—As I understand it, it is like a docking mechanism. They fuse the organic part with a port, into which one would slot different enchanted prosthetics. Hands and such."

Uh-huh.

"I thought the idea was to let me keep the claw," he says. Then, mind skirting around the pits very carefully, he adds, "I don't mean to be a—But I think keeping the claw is not as optional as I'd like. Meaning—Cutting it is not—A thing I can let happen."

"We assumed as much." Reg nods like none of this is out of the ordinary. "It's not a problem. It will take a surgery or two, but as I understand, they can build the prosthetic around the bone, and fuse and re-grow the flesh and nerves to it after."

Itachi closes his eyes. "Right. Good."

"It will be fine. That's why we have the control. Anything that both the Headmaster and Lord Riddle sign off on will be a truly outstanding piece of magic."

Amaterasu be merciful.

Days and weeks go by in a haze. It's not that Itachi is kept in isolation deliberately. Physically he's fine, he's even graduated to standing up and walking around his beautiful, airy room. It's just that *mentally*, he's as sturdy as a bubble of soap. His visitors are many, but they can only stay for a couple of minutes before something triggers the bubble of unknown lurking in Itachi's mind, and he'd shut down.

Regulus is an exception, of course, as is Kreacher. James is better than most, because his method of babbling random nonsense without rhyme or reason is a good distraction, even if it does sometimes backfire. His badgers can stay for up to ten minutes if they are careful to talk about mundane bits and pieces they have learned or seen. The worst are the adult Blacks, unfortunately, because Itachi can't stop his mind from associating them with—Life outside. Life before. This invariably leads him to think about what has happened, what is happening and what *is going to happen*—

Naturally, the only solution is that he barely gets to see them. When consensus is reached on the arm surgery and they're no closer to figuring out a method for stabilising Itachi's psyche, he decides it's time to act.

"Alright," he says. "It's time to think some thoughts, Reg. I'm already meditating for ninety per cent of my awake time. This is clearly not working."

Reg, who visibly aged at least ten months in the five weeks Itachi has been paying attention, nods. "You have to be awake during it," he says, voice grim. "It's not an easy surgery as is, it can't be done if they have to worry about the differing energy flows as well."

Yes, well.

"A distraction," Itachi says. "Or I try Occlu—" Pain stabs between his eyes. "Or I learn better meditative techniques."

Regulus nods again, gesture sharp and definite. “I will figure it out.”

Itachi never once doubted his brother, but even he is shocked when, the following day, he comes with company.

“Black,” says Lord Riddle, inclining his head, expression arranged in the typical detached blankness.

“Lord Riddle,” Itachi says slowly. “Fawkes. I—Hadn’t expected to see you. It is a pleasure.”

“I thought we’d try an experiment,” Regulus says. “In controlled circumstances.”

Control. Itachi cuts his eyes to Regulus, beyond bewildered. What control? He brought—He brought *Riddle* of all damn people. If ever there was a man who he did not want to see when he’s bed-bound and pathetic—Last time he’s seen him he—

“Go,” Riddle snaps and—

Fawkes bursts into song. The avalanche of weight lifts off of Itachi, as the notes wind themselves into him, dampening the pain and cushioning all the raw, overstressed parts of his mind. He sags into his bed like a wrung-out towel, blissed out and loopy.

“Good,” he hears Regulus say. Good? What’s good?

What were they talking about?

“Lord Riddle?” Itachi blinks. “Why—Reg?” His mind shifts back into focus. There is—It’s not resistance, precisely, but his thoughts feel—Cushioned. Coated with a thick, protective

layer of golden syrup. What—

“I am an empath,” Riddle says. “I can sense when you are about to trip into error. The bird is here to yank you back. The end.”

Itachi blinks. He blinks again. Lord Riddle is an empath? And Fawkes will—

“You’re really tall,” he finds himself saying. “I always thought that was comforting.” Kisame was tall. He always took good care of him. Then, though, he died. A worthy death, unlike Itachi. That’s probably why he got to rest—

“Again.”

Lord Riddle is not the only empath on offer, Itachi learns over the coming days and weeks, but he is the only one who’s already cleared to access Itachi.

“How did you get Riddle in here, anyway?”

“Nobody is very happy about it,” Regulus says, lips tilted in a tense smile. “The Headmaster most of all. Unfortunately, their opinions don’t matter. *You* like him and I trust him to want to help. As far as I’m concerned, that’s where the conversation ends.”

Okay. So.

“I do admire him,” he says slowly. “But that’s not—I don’t see how this is supposed to work, Reg.”

“We’re working on it,” Regulus says. “The most important thing was to figure out a way to manage your—To figure out the triggers and develop a way to pull you back.”

Right.

“Lord Riddle is cooperating with the ICW,” he says, out loud, tasting the words. “Is he—” His heart rate starts picking up and he slams his thoughts down, focusing on Regulus. “Huh. Do you know, it’s working a little.” He’s recognising when to back off, at least.

“Hardly,” Regulus says. “But this is just a temporary solution. When we stabilise your body, we will work out a way that *doesn’t* include such invasive mental manipulation.”

Please. “Before, we had a Clan called Yamanaka,” he says. “Like a House, more or less. Their whole purpose was to enter a mind and cut away the bad bits.” As determined by the Nara. “You got me a firebird and a man I’ve admired since I’ve seen him first.”

“I am touched,” Lord Riddle says from the doorway. “And intrigued by the prospect of a hands-on approach to organising your society. That said, the operation hall is ready.”

Itachi blinks once and twice.

“Lord Riddle,” he says. “And Headmaster Dumbledore. I—What? You—What?”

“Gibbering nonsense is beneath you,” says Lord Riddle. “The old fool is here because he, as much as it pains me to admit, isn’t incompetent in his chosen field, as banal as it may be.”

True.

“Merry meet, Heir Black,” says the Headmaster, looking down at him with an expression of studied calm. “And young Regulus, of course. We are ready, and it is not wise to tarry. This climate is not good for Signe’s constitution.”

Signe?

“A Muspeli smith,” snaps Lord Riddle. “And an absolute harridan. Now, while I still have a modicum of patience left, pull yourself together.”

Wow. They got a fire giant? How in Heavens’ name did they get—

“The Chrysanthemum court reached out originally,” Regulus says. “Not that they needed much convincing. I don’t know that there is a single magical enclave that *isn’t* on board.”

Right. He closes his eyes and inhales a long, steadying breath. “Lovely. You said everybody and you meant everybody. Alright. What do I—”

“Regrettably, we were instructed to limit magic use around you as much as possible, until the working is finished,” the Headmaster says. “Which means—”

“He knows what it means,” Lord Riddle snaps. “He is not an imbecile.” He sends Itachi a long look, daring him to prove him wrong. Not being an idiot, he nods and starts shuffling to the side. Walking it is. “Did your brother explain what to expect?”

“Yes,” he says. He didn’t get this far by *not* being on Reg’s side.

“I covered the broad strokes,” Regulus says, looking up at the Headmaster with—Huh. Remember this. This will probably be important. “I don’t understand the particulars well enough to explain them.”

“You are not alone in this, alas,” says the Headmaster. “We are stumbling through uncharted territory.”

“They will weld a piece of orichalcum to your ulna and radius,” Lord Riddle says. “That is why the Muspeli, Signe, is here. Then they will fuse it to the arm. That bit will be a collaborative effort, primarily done by Fawkes and Naila--a Svartálfar alchemist. The old fool will keep a negation field around your bones and I will make sure that you don’t blow us all up in a fit of pique.”

Huh. Nice and succinct. Itachi wraps up a bubble of gratitude and imagines throwing it at the man. Riddle’s lips twist with disgust.

“Spare me. Jarwal is a formidable battle mage and decent company. If Naila hadn’t brought him along, I wouldn’t have bothered.”

“Is this necessary,” he says, once he gets there and realises that the operation will take place in a picturesque little clearing in the middle of an amphitheatre packed with beings of all shapes and sizes.

“Yes,” Regulus says. “Nobody is taking any chances, least of all me. At the first sign of trouble, the procedure is cancelled.”

Wonderful.

“Göransson was arrested, by the by,” Lord Riddle says.

“He was *what.”* How could they—

“Oh, yes. Several weeks back. Couldn’t have happened to a better lunatic, frankly.”

He knows he’s being distracted. He does. “Bite your tongue,” he snaps. “Göransson is a treasure and a revolutionary example.”

“He is a lunatic who buries his lack of understanding of the nature of sentience in made-up lingo and quackery.”

Itachi grits his teeth and speed-works through the introductions to the team of healers. The Muspeli—Signe—is obvious, what with being eight feet tall and actively on fire. Similarly, the dark elf, Naila, with grey-green skin, ridges down her skull and giant, round eyes that look improbably like an owl is anything but inconspicuous. Ideally, he’d have liked to speak with them. Now—

“I would *think* his view that terrorism is autoimmune violence that brings to the foreground the violence that acts as the immune system of hegemony would suit your temperament. What with one thing and another.”

“Hardly. I will admit that the fact he lived as long as he had *is* some show of competence, but I am not convinced it is not pure luck. I look forward to seeing how much his so-called non-violent resistance principles will help him in a Hungarian work camp.”

“It will help him plenty,” he says, baring his teeth. “If nothing else than because his students and all the beings he’s helped will come to his aid.”

The horrible man rolls his eyes at him and nudges him into the seat. “How progressive. It’s almost as if you agree that weaponising your incompetence will only force others to rescue you at a cost to themselves. How radical—”

“I don’t know what we should do, but I do know, *very well*, that power gained by killing everybody who opposes you is brief, cheap and forgettable.” He leans back, as urged by the Muspeli’s assistants. Straps are affixed around his chest. “In a hundred years, Göransson’s name will be known. The name of whatever power-hungry governmental ghoul had thrown him in prison will not be.”

“Plenty of people are talked about in history,” Riddle says, waving a bored hand. “Most of them have contributed nothing of value. Göransson is trying to bottle his unearned and inborn moral superiority and sell it as wisdom. His ideal society would require a level of top-down control beyond what any Dark Lord had ever attempted.”

Alight, so that's a fair point, sort of. Göransson does have a bit of a naive view of the fundamental goodness of sentience. Still—

"Inhale," Riddle says. "And out. Again. Now, alright, I'll grant you that Göransson *had* spawned some interesting theorists. Riblett, I thought, would have had an interesting path if he hadn't gone into the arts."

Itachi breathes through the pain, jaw clenched as far as he can go. "Riblett is an indecisive, thoughtless, self-centred aristocrat," he grits out. "Most Riblett could do for his stated cause is die and leave them his gold."

"Harsh. I have known him for some time. He is reflective and balanced. Too much of a bleeding heart for my tastes, but he is hardly unobservant or unintelligent."

Pah. "Please, do introduce us," he says. Spots are dancing in his eyes. "I'd love to watch as he drowns in self-pity. Hack." Light violet smoke is coming off his arm. It smells of mint and some sort of inorganic, calcium-like smell—

"I will," Riddle says. It takes a moment to gather some awareness but once Itachi finds those piercing red eyes, keeping focus is easy again. "He stops by every once in a while. He and Shabazz started a journal. They call it Rhyme & Reason."

"I *will* puke on your shoes," Itachi huffs. "Rhyme and—How very exciting. I can imagine him and all his Pureblood friends getting together for—" He has to pause in his rant and close his throat so he wouldn't scream. Riddle's eyes fix him in place, not letting his focus dissolve. "—tea and cakes and talk about the plight of the working man."

"He serves excellent tea, I will grant you. And cakes. He bakes in his free time, I understand. It calms him."

"Oh, I don't doubt there is much in—" A stalled hitch of a scream builds in his throat and he turns it into a hiss. "—the life of a sheltered publicite that would require robust self-soothing

protocols."

Riddle's smirk turns more honest, which is miraculous in itself. "Sheltered, maybe, but he is hardly fame-hungry. Veela rarely are. Plus, I understand you are fond of one of his recent works. I wasn't impressed with the title. *Withholding* is such an obvious choice—"

Hold on. "Guillaume Riblett wrote *Withholding*?!"

"Mm. Shabazz made him publish it. Shabazz and Göransson whom you are so enamoured with."

"I'm hardly enamoured," Itachi snaps. "I admire Göransson for his convictions and fortitude. But—" His heart stutters, as lightning arcs up his shoulder, making his body seize.

"Breathe," he hears Riddle say. Order. Itachi, who was known on occasion to enjoy clear and direct command, obeys. "Breathe and focus. Pain is trivial."

True.

"Calm yourself and focus on me. We were talking about Guillaume's poems. I thought *Intemperate* was a success—"

Chapter End Notes

Svartálfar
In Norse mythology, the Svartálfar, also known as the Dark Elves, are a distinct group of supernatural beings who dwell underground and are often associated with craftsmanship,

particularly metalwork. The term "Svartálfar" is mentioned in various Old Norse sources, including the Prose Edda by Snorri Sturluson and the Poetic Edda.

Ifrit
Ifrits are powerful and malevolent supernatural creatures mentioned in Arabic and Islamic mythology. The term itself is not found in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, although variants such as ifriya and ifr are.

Muspeli
"Muspelheim," is a realm in Norse mythology, and it is often referred to as one of the Nine Worlds in the cosmology of Norse folklore. Muspelheim is a world associated with fire, heat, and chaos, and it is inhabited by the fire giants. In Norse mythology, the fire giants are often referred to as "Muspilli" or "Eldjötnar."

None of the other ‘thinkers’ mentioned are real, but I based Goransson on a mix of Hegel and Derrida with some twists for humour and my lack of understanding of Hegel :D

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The surgery takes hours. The *dead*-dead bit starts about half an inch above the wrist. If he understands everything correctly, the plan is to have the improvised socket and housing element start in the upper part of his forearm, closer to the elbow. What they plan to do with the flesh and nerves below that line, he doesn't know and he doesn't care. They will do what they need to, probably. All he has to do is survive it.

Halfway through the dark elf—Naila?—demands he take a break.

"My lady," he says, perhaps somewhat delirious with pain and intellectual outrage. "Lord Riddle's strategy of managing me is to induce as much irritation as he is able. I want to get this done so I can pull up the relevant texts and prove his error."

"I'm sure you do," she says, voice flat and unamused. "These surgeries are typically spread out over weeks and supported by mundane analgesic medication. Your mentor's adage that pain is trivial is not something that I want to approach from a medical standpoint."

His *what?*

"He can take it," Lord Riddle says. "More importantly, he *has* to take it. You can't numb his pain, and you can't knock him out. Pain that can't be avoided should be acknowledged and dismissed, not indulged."

Okay, so. Itachi feels like maybe they glossed over the most important bit. *Mentor* is not *teacher.* If Itachi ever had a *mentor*, it would have been Shisui, for the too-brief time they were alive together. Kakashi never wanted him and Kisame was only ever loyal to Madara. Obito. Rarely, typically very late at night, he had dreamed—In a different life, Orochimaru might have—Jiraiya might have—Tsunade might have—Hell, *Nagato* might have looked at him and saw something he liked. Something he wanted to cultivate. Wishes aren't fishes, unfortunately. No mentor had materialised before, and it seems unlikely one will materialise now.

“Lord Riddle is correct,” he says, voice settling into Uchiha dispassionate flow. “It seems foolish to prolong this when there is work to be done.” Work. There is always work to do, and, it seems that the price for his new life has begun to crystallise—Breath escapes his lungs in a whoosh, as pain spreads from his forehead, down into his throat. There is very little available magic his body can draw, and—Alarm pulses in his ears.

“Focus,” Riddle snaps. “You are not a beast. Tell me about van Leeuwen.”

Itachi blinks. “You? *You've* read Helen van Leeuwen?”

“I have been known to do things beneath me,” Riddle says. “Usually as a consequence of a competent and well-thought-out bribe. I take it you are a fan?”

“*Resorting to violence is a confession of weakness,”* Itachi says, lips twitching. “She has her moments. Demystifying evil is hardly original, but she is a talented writer.”

“I would have thought her framing of power would suit your temperament more. *Power is based on consent* and all that.”

Itachi tries to roll his eyes but remembers that he's in something of a curled-up heap. Instead, he accepts the assistants' help to pick him up from the ground. He's dug wounds into his upper arms and back; fairly shallow, so they settle for clean, mundane bandages. He hasn't even had time to come to terms with his embarrassment when Riddle makes a sound in the back of his throat so loaded with disgust, that it flips right into charming.

“Shame is for the weak-minded. Now, *focus.* We were talking about your inexplicable dislike of a progressive, gooey political philosopher who should be your messiah.”

Ugh. “Hardly,” he says, and pointedly sits back in his seat. The team of healers probably agreed, especially since Headmaster Dumbledore had a quick word with them. Maintaining a nullifying field around his claw is—Well. Lord Riddle would have had the raw power to do it and that's all anyone needs to know. Whatever the case may be, they start strapping him back

into the contraption. “There is nothing revolutionary about the observation that leading requires the consent of those who are to be lead. You can extract that consent by force for a little while, but sooner or later, it’s off to the guillotine if you don’t get some actual power.”

Riddle makes a noise of approval that’s been dunked in a vat of scorn. “I, of course, agree. Van Leeuwen and her whole cohort are irritating, pedantic busybodies too timid to admit the truth.”

Well, he wouldn’t go *that* far. “Naive, maybe. Or arrogant. I’ve not read too many philosophical texts about power and violence on the individual level that were convincing—” The acute, bewildering pain resumes. It’s almost a relief. The relentlessness of before was difficult to withstand. This, now, feels like an enemy to fight. Something he can resist. Still, his voice grows thick with distress. “—but the poets manage it almost without trying.” Well. “Mention Riblett and I will do something drastic.”

“Her teacher was somewhat more interesting. And *his* teacher was a fascinating being.”

Itachi groans long and heartfelt, letting go of whatever nightmare is happening to his arm. “Of course. I should have guessed. Ozansoy. You like the only urban leshy known in word or text. He was *clinically insane, Marvolo.”*

He can’t quite make out the expression on Riddle’s face, as blurry as his eyes have gone. “Details. Ozansoy hadn’t bothered dumbing down his words *and* he knew that it’s better to invent a specific word, clearly define it and then use it from then on, than use terms willy-nilly.”

“He was a leshy living in Berlin.” Breathe. “And his work is almost completely inaccessible. That’s not how language works. You can’t invent a word, say what it means and consider the matter done. And don’t get me *started* on his pensieve nonsense.”

“Foolish,” Riddle says. “Ozansoy was a leshy; you can hardly expect him to write on paper. Moreover, his memory spheres convey a lot more information than a text ever could.”

Hah. “If you understand whatever cursed dialect of Classical Armenian that is *and* if you can follow his mad ramblings. I’ve gone through translations and interpretations and was on the brink of indiscriminate violence after an hour.”

“And so we get to the root of the issue—aha-ha: don’t blame Ozansoy for your intellectual faults. Grabar is hardly an insurmountable obstacle.”

No, the real obstacle is that Ozansoy’s creaking, hysterical voice made him want to cover himself with a blanket and cry. He *was* insane, no matter what Riddle said. Insane and a genius. His motivations might have been and remained a mystery, but his conviction and his effects were undeniable.

Still. “A Bulgarian forest spirit, using the name of a Turkish poet, using exclusively ancient Armenian while he lived in Berlin—” Even Oznasoy-induced outrage starts cracking as the fire giant’s chanting rises in pitch. The smell of burnt organic matter spikes, and Itachi’s body seizes. Breathe. Don’t scream. You are a fully grown Shinobi trained by the best. What did Rabbit say about torture? There are tricks, aren’t there? Itachi could slide away from a *Yamanaka* when he put his mind to it—

“*Focus!”*

He hisses out a breath and does his best. Right. No Chakra. He is a wizardling, now. “I—”

“Focus on my voice. If there is to be purpose in life, there must be suffering as well. I am not asking more of you than you can give. So, listen and focus.”

Ugh. Sounds *just* like something Ozansoy would say. “Noble suffering in pursuit of glory?”

“Brat. Everything that must be done can be done. You are not a rabbit or a sheep, as much as you like to pretend otherwise so as not to alarm your menagerie.”

Yes, well. “I—”

“Breathe. Focus. There is no sense in denying reality, but you are not striving to survive surgery. Surviving the surgery is a given. You are striving for worth.”

His auditory perception is struggling, as he focuses all the energy he has on regulating his breathing and heart rate. The press of magic around them complicates matters. Fawkes can’t heal him until they are finished attaching his flesh to the piece of Orichalcum—Riddle is right. This surgery isn’t even an obstacle. Is he going to die here? No, he isn’t. He doesn’t even have to do anything.

“Can you—” His eyes are burning and his mind is slow. Not a good combination for someone who still thinks like a Dōjutsu user. “I should close my eyes. My control is slipping. I—” He exhales around a bubble of pain. “Tell me something? Please?”

Someone’s hand closes his eyelids and Itachi starts peeling away the layers of sound and sensory input he doesn’t need. The sense of smell goes. The sound of ritual chanting and sizzling of organic matter goes. Bit by bit, his world narrows on the sound of Riddle’s composed, unaffected voice.

“—freedom. Your will can be affected but not determined by impulses. Freedom of choice is independence from being determined by sensible impulses—”

He doesn’t pass out, which is good. They would have woken him up just fine, but waking up to a state of agony would probably *not* be good for his health.

“Well, that was terrible,” he croaks. “Let’s never do it again.”

Riddle arches his eyebrows at him. “Funny. Come on then, let’s have a look.”

Somehow, Itachi summons up some energy to smile up at the man. The assistants spelled away all the blood and flesh and potions and Fawkes finally could soak his arm in tears. His mind is pleasantly loopy; loopy enough to not be bothered about several hundred strangers seeing him at his weakest—Lord Riddle most of all. “My body can’t make sense of it,” he says. “But, okay, I can do this.”

Moving his left arm with his right is not as easy as it looks. He almost slides off the bed, now that the straps and things are gone. “Huh. Not bad.”

“It suits you,” Riddle says, eying the bizarre sort of prosthetic. His arm is neatly divided into two. The fleshy part ends in a coppery-red disc of Orichalcum. From there, things grow trippy. The radius and the ulna are twisted together into a spiral for some reason, and are, fortified in some way by ropes of metal. Is that—

“Star metal,” says Riddle. “And gold. Bone is naturally hollow, so they used the opportunity.”

The fortification stops at the wrist—you can see the difference in colour and workmanship. The upper part is sanded down and magic-perfect. From the wrist down, it’s a charred, macabre mess.

He lets the arm fall and sags into the operating table. The healers are still doing *something*—and the Headmaster is still arranged in a beautiful statue of focus in the circle on the left—so he probably can’t leave just yet.

“An unpleasant task is done. Now, you integrate it into your self-concept and move on. It’s a hand. It’s *your* hand. Do you need to complicate things further?”

“Well, if there is anyone that wasn’t terrified of you before, they certainly are now,” James says, bright smile brittle on his face.

“Dramatic,” Itachi sighs. Immediately after the surgery finished, he was suspended in a bubble of magic and bundled into bed. The intervention is appreciated; he can barely pick up his head from exhaustion.

Andrew makes a quiet sound of controlled amusement. “Is that what you focus on? They peeled away flesh from your bones and you were discussing obscure philosophy with Lord Riddle with barely a hitch in your voice.”

Ugh. “He was distracting me. I’m not allowed to use magic.”

“We know, Siri,” says Noah. “We were just—”

“We weren’t even there, and the rumours will make me have nightmares,” Andrew picks back up. “

So everybody is upset, then. Everybody other than Regulus, and thank the Lady for small mercies. “But it looks pretty, at least.”

Timothy makes a noise, like a laugh. Half a laugh. A laughs dour younger cousin. “Very cool. Like some sort of sword. The shiny metal can be the hilt.”

Itachi sighs. Even *Timothy* is distraught. “Why do the rumours bother you? It’s more of the same. A grain of truth blown out of proportion.”

“It’s dehumanising,” Reg says, from the armchair in the corner, where he’s pouring over a binder of loose papers. “The adults aren’t even shocked, anymore. They will be shocked when you do, eventually, fail, but success and dignity are the norm. Your friends are unhappy with it, and so am I.”

A sound of contained fury from Andrew mixes with Timothy’s quiet *yeah.* “You’re—They talk about you like you’re—”

Itachi resists the urge to curl up in a ball and hide under the blanket for a couple of days. “No serious talk. Not for a while yet.”

“Of course, Siri,” says Timothy quietly. “I—I have a book you’ll like. It’s muggle and it’s not political, so you probably hadn’t heard about it. It’s about—Love, more or less—”

The council of war, so to speak, is scheduled for two weeks later. Now that his body is stabilised, the worst of the worry is gone. Under controlled circumstances, he can—Start making sense of things. The last news he had from the world was from two months ago. He needs to—He should—

A bolt of anxiety bursts behind his eyes, settling to the root of his palms and the back of his throat. It’s been like this since the surgery. Instead of making him feel better, the surgery, the phoenix tears and the Elixir of Life had made him a twitchy, restless mess.

“Right,” he croaks. The stress and heartache have begun to leave psychosomatic symptoms. No Shinobi will have a tremor in his hands and randomly occurring flashes of mortal terror. “I’m sorry Reg, but I need all of you to leave me alone. I—Two weeks of peace. That’s what I want. I’ll stay in my rooms, within the range of the spellwork, so you can be certain that all the potions and nutrients I need are spelled straight to my bloodstream, but I—I need to not be present in my life for the next little while.”

“Of course, Tachi,” Regulus says. He should be ten. He looks thirteen, at least. Older than Itachi’s body in any case—not that any of them are stellar examples of temporal beings these days. “Anything you want.”

If only.

The two weeks flow by in a gentle, golden haze of meditation. Riddle was right—Whatever happened, happened, and it's time to start coming to terms with it. He is still alive. He is still able. He can still affect his circumstances.

Fawkes sings to him for at least an hour per day, he glides his body through the softest, recovery Kata he can remember, and doesn't say a single word. The hand still feels, sort of. He can't move it—yet—but he can feel a ghost of a tactile sensation. No heat, pain or pleasure, but he is aware of pressure, in a way.

Mostly, though, he exists in his body and doesn't think. He sleeps when he can and meditates through the rest of it, getting accustomed to the feeling of individual muscles flexing. Neck—shoulders—chest—abdomen—hips—legs—hands—feet—face—

The proverbial council of war is streamlined. Lord Riddle, Headmaster Dumbledore and Fawkes were a given, as were the Flamels, Grandfather and Regulus. The only somewhat surprising figure is Charlus Potter, and that will probably make sense all too soon.

He prepared as best he could with a long bath and a longer self-care routine, trying to drown out the full-body ache and the hormonal spikes he couldn't seem to get away from. It's hardly odd; the body he's in went through a lot. Itachi can accept and internalise until the cows go home, but at a certain point, a body will have had enough. This is the third time a team of healers have dragged him potion by potion away from death's door. Regulus claims that the Elixir of Life fixed all that. If this is how it feels when things are fixed, then he would much rather never even intuit the alternative.

"You look better," Grandfather says after the procedural greetings are swapped. "Older, but better. The working was an unparalleled success."

Itachi's nostrils flare, but he doesn't argue. It was, probably. His—*issues*—are probably leftover damage from a previous brush with death.

"Your friends are fine," Reg says. "All of them. Even Garnall and his team. They have gotten back to guarding the castle a couple of days ago."

Oh?

“I’m glad. They were—upset. Before. Apparently, the rumours were—They hadn’t expected them.”

“Shocking,” drawls Riddle, which, okay. Itachi blinks up at him, sending a wave of confusion his way. Riddle frowns at him, then rolls his eyes and presses a long, complicated rhythm into the wood of the desk. “I haven’t expected the rumours,” he says, finally. “They—After everything that went down in the Ministry, I thought they would have gotten a feel for your methods.”

Pain twinges in the back of his mind, but it’s a shadow of what it had been. A vague displeasure rather than a warning of immediate demise. Okay.

“The rumours are *worse* now,” he says, injecting as much disbelief as he can into his voice. “Why?”

“You should have screamed and begged and wept, apparently,” Riddle says. They share a displeased look. “Precisely. People are when all is said and done, always going to disappoint you. On the off chance you hadn’t learned this already, this is as good a time as any.”

Yikes.

“Dull,” he says. “Alright, I can’t say I care too much.”

“How do you feel, Tachi,” Reg says, ignoring the sharp looks he gets for the nickname. A lot of things were thought of as harmless make-believe before. None of that will fly by undressed any more, now that the idea of reincarnation is on the table and unexplainable bits and pieces are stacking up. “For real?”

Hmm. “I am a mess,” he says. “My mind is—But that’s not important. I report definite improvement. I haven’t detected any irregular heart patterns, my breathing is unobstructed and no significant muscle loss has happened.”

Reg’s smile doesn’t lighten, which is concerning. “That’s good. And—Did you recover a little, y’know? From us?”

Ah. “I always want to be with you, Reg,” he hurries to say, eyes widening. “It was never about that. I couldn’t—”

“I know,” Regulus says, putting up a hand. “I never doubted it. I meant—Did you find that calm? Do you feel more in control of the situation.”

Hah. As if. “I don’t know,” he says after a long pause. “I don’t feel like I’m going to die in point two seconds, so, yes? Somewhat?”

“Morgana wept,” says Lord Riddle, rubbing his temples. “You’re not defective, Black. You’re in puberty. Get over yourself.”

Itachi blinks, blanches and blushes, all at the same time. He—But—

He doesn’t remember much about his first puberty. It was induced early, when he was eight, and medics helped him speedwalk through it in fifteen, sixteen months. Now—

“This is *normal,*” he says, outraged. “What—I am anxious all the time. I have emotions lodged in my throat, my skin itches and I have mood swings like you wouldn’t believe—”

The tense, tragic atmosphere in the room is lightening, which, yes, is good, but it also makes him feel like he’s being mocked. He probably had nightmares that went exactly like this. Regulus, the Headmaster and Lord Riddle, sitting around a table, mocking him. All that’s missing is James, and Lord Potter is a fantastic substitute.

“All normal,” Regulus says. “Well—I can’t vouch for your intensity. Your system might be shocked by the intensity, if you went from nothing to a healthy amount of hormones for a boy your age. But the sensations themselves are normal.”

“Like *hell,”* he says. “I—You people *live* like this? How—” Breahte. Focus.

“I’m afraid so,” says Lord Potter. “Why did you think everybody around you is so nuts?”

Hmph. “I am a Hufflepuff, thank you. The children I claimed are well-behaved and self-contained. And Regulus, of course, is without flaw or error and should be celebrated for it at all times.”

Chapter End Notes

Thinkers and Inspirations

- **Helen van Leeuwen:** Vague version of Hannah Arendt.
- **Kirilov / Ozansoy:** Mix of Nietzsche & Zizek.
- Van Leeuwen's teacher: Vaguely Foucault-like figure.
- Kant influences noted towards the end.

Reference Materials

- A Critical Essay on Nietzsche - Victor Serge
- The Review of Politics: Force and Power in Human Affairs - Bernard Norling
- The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon, Ch89 Violence - Joanna Oksala
- On Violence - Hannah Arendt
- Nietzsche on the Value of Suffering - Patrick Hassan

Mythological Figures

Leshy: Slavic forest deity, protector and kidnapper of children.

Faik Ali Ozansoy (1876-1950): Turkish poet, educator, and politician known for saving Armenian lives during the genocide.

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Itachi's de-escalating tricks aren't going to cut it, it seems. The atmosphere in the room is lighter, but with Lord Riddle in the room—Even if he was absent, they wouldn't. Too much has happened, too much has changed, for Itachi to be able to hide behind Sirius Black, age eleven, a clueless, dramatic Pureblood Prince.

"Stop stalling, brat. If you don't want to talk, say so."

That's a mercy, of a sort. As much of a mercy as Riddle is capable of in any case. "I—" What? "So, I guess that there is—trouble. Because of the attack." Wait. "Was it an attack?"

Tension settles in Regulus' too-old body, as Riddle's lips stretch in a beautiful smile. He looks *delighted*. Delight is not an encouraging emotion to see in a man who might as well be the idea of a shark beaten into a human form.

"As far as we can tell, the Dementors attacked on their own volition," Grandfather says. "But their presence was orchestrated as some sort of—power move."

"They wanted to frighten you," Riddle says, breathing out each word with relish. "The prosecutor wanted to teach you some *humility*."

Itachi is quiet for a long sequence of moments. He—"He set a pack of soul-eating monsters on me because—" He's not even angry. He will be, but for now, he's happy to cling to the absurdity of it all. "He exposed Regulus and James to horrors beyond mortal understanding because—Because I hurt his feelings."

"He changed the world." Riddle leans forward, eyes sparkling and teeth bared. Never has he seen a human better suited for Kirigakure. Momochi Zabuza would have greeted him as a long-lost brother. "A nameless, worthless Ministry ghoul did as his nature would direct him

and stacked one more bit of foolishness to an already oversaturated system. Or should I say, one *last* bit."

Itachi considers his audience. Lord Riddle is happier than he thought him capable. Regulus is calm. Grandfather—He can't tell. Grandfather and Lord Potter are inaccessible. Lord and Lady Flamel are wary of him—or wary of what would happen if he's pushed too far—and the Headmaster is lost in a private hell. Alright, so, whatever happened, it's probably not going to be good.

"By which you mean?"

"Ministry has, for the most part, fallen," Riddle says. "Magical Europe is two breaths short of anarchy. Goblin Nation has delivered the contents of their customers' vaults to their owners and called back all their people. Our currency is worthless, in other words. The concept of a nation-state is not far behind."

"*What?"*

"Lord Riddle is exaggerating, but not by much," Regulus says. "Apparently—and this was news for me as well—nobody has ever killed a Dementor. Once you had, they regrouped and attacked."

Itachi breathes quietly for a long moment. Then another. The *Dementors* had—

"I hadn't thought they had—ambitions like that," he starts to say and stops, immediately. Those things, those not-beings. Hive-mind Kaguya, he remembers. Alien creatures feeding on energy, hiding in plain sight. Kaguya had Zetsu. Maybe these *Dementors* did the same. If they can't be killed, they must be endured, and magical beings had endured them. It would have been easier to play along, to keep more or less civil. And now—

"They never had before." Regulus looks composed, unlike the rest of the room's occupants who are staring at him with vaguely hidden interest. What are they looking for? What should Itachi be feeling here? "They fought in wars, typically on whichever side would let them feed

on the prisoners. They hadn't attacked. The consensus was they weren't intelligent enough to have things like collective interest."

Yikes. And Itachi can't even be smug and arrogant about it, because he thought the same—on the off-chance he thought about Dementors at all.

"After the first wave of attacks, the nonhumans started banding together. By November, the biggest migrations had already happened. Since the Goblins were the first to leave, you can imagine that this destabilised things further."

Some of the dread mounting in his spine vanishes to make room for cautious delights. Riddle, their resident empath, smirks. "Like House Morgan and the dryads," he says, affecting a casual, curious tone. He doesn't even fool the Headmaster, let alone Regulus and Grandfather. Still. Please, Heavens, please let it not be more degrading. More desperate offers made to unscrupulous Noble families.

Reg huffs a sound, sort of like a laugh, sort of like a sigh. "Dwarves, Dragons and Vampires have claimed the Caucasus mountains. Veela, Harpies and Slyphs control a solid half of the Alps. Gorgons ran to the Naga enclaves in India, and Kitsune, Peri and a number of lycanthrophe variants allied with Svartálfar, Ifriti, Muspeli and Dactyls. They control both the Ural Mountains and the tundra and taiga surrounding them."

Relief punches through, taking with it still more dread. "Wow," he says, for lack of something insightful. "That's the best news I've heard all year." No, that was the wrong thing to say, judging by the pained grimace that flashed over Grandfather's face. "But also bad. Because—" Why would it possibly be bad? Being atomised was the worst thing that happened to sentient nonhumans, he always thought so—

"Because it strained the Statute, yes, very insightful of you, 'Tachi," Regulus says, coming to his rescue because he is a gift of the Gods. "We managed to patch up the worst of it for now, but it's hanging by a thread."

"Terrible," he says promptly. "Awful. All those sentient beings taking advantage of the humans' misfortune to throw off the shackles of oppression and take steps towards liberation. How dare they, the filthy savages."

Reg sighs and sends Headmaster Dumbledore a speaking look. Itachi notes the easy line of communication. Is this how mothers feel when their daughters start looking at boys and deciding which ones they will claim? Reggie, it seems, has found a mentor and Itachi can't quite find it in his heart to mind. It will be an unconventional apprenticeship—Reg's magic is hardly *light*—but the Headmaster is accomplished and honourable in his way.

"A lot of blood has been spilt," the Headmaster says quietly. "The muggles are not at fault for the failings of wizards, and yet, they are paying the price."

"The muggles choke the air, mow down the forest, poison the soil and pollute the oceans," Lord Riddle says. "Among other things. But we are not here to discuss the muggles. We are here to discuss Black and how his survival can be engineered past the month."

Wow. Itachi's lips twitch. What a nightmare. "Some context, if you don't mind?"

"Nobody has killed a dementor in living memory," the Headmaster says. "Some countries have sealed them off into temporary prisons at a steep cost, but nobody has managed to kill one."

"Or release the souls they ate," Lord Potter adds. "People theorised that dementors only draw the soul out of the body and sever the connection between the two. The consensus was that they feed on the energy released during the severing."

Yikes. Alright. He can see why that would be a more comforting proposal. You can't do anything either way, so why not go with the less horrific option?

"Now that we *can* kill them, all bets are off," Riddle says. "They have been attacking magical beings wherever they can. For example, the first thing they did after they couldn't find you in the Ministry was to kill every inmate in Azkaban."

The somewhat lighthearted atmosphere vanishes like so much smoke. Pain lodges in his throat, as his eyes begin to itch. He can feel his magic draining—

“Stop that,” Riddle snaps, at the same time as Fawkes flies up and trills a brief, but powerful command. “You have only begun to stabilise. You killing yourself by exhaustion will help nothing and no one.”

Yes, well.

“If you think I am doing this any of this on purpose—”

“What matters is that *you* are doing it. By which I mean you can stop.”

Breathe. In and out. Focus on your surroundings. Focus on your irritation if nothing else. What can you smell? What can you feel?

“Hey, ‘Tachi?” Itachi looks up. Regulus is smiling at him. A sincere smile, too, small but resolute and fierce as he has been for far too long. “You are not alone in this. Nobody needs you to save the world. Nobody *expects* you to.”

Uh-huh. Only, Itachi was, possibly, *made* for this. He was—

“Littlest Black is, of course, correct,” Riddle says. Itachi’s thoughts stumble. What is this, now? “You can do as much or as little as you want. There will be consequences either way.”

“Freedom of choice, not freedom from consequence,” he says in his best *fuck you* tone.

Riddle shrugs, lips twitching. “You’ve been a world-famous commodity for far less cause than dementor slaying.”

Bless.

“While Lord Riddle could have used more sensitive phrasing, he is broadly correct,” says Lord Flamel. “There is no question of *if* you will be drawn into this conflict. You can only hope to manage the *how.”*

“And extract a high price for your services,” says Regulus, expression as hard as he’s ever seen it.

Right.

Somehow, his eyes find the Headmaster. He looks calm in the ways of people who have learned to keep their screams nice and tucked away. Out of all the people in the room, he might be the only one who was in a similar position. With the benefit of hindsight, Itachi knows he was never anything resembling a pacifist. The Headmaster, however, might very well be one. He was pushed into fighting, into battle, by the public pressure. That’s not an easy place to be.

“There is no good solution in sight, I am afraid,” the Headmaster says. “We could hope to shelter you, but the enemy will follow. Dementors can be repelled and imprisoned with great effort. Sooner or later, the fight will come to you.”

Bless. “Fighting, Headmaster, was never the problem,” he says. “Knowing where to fight, when and with whom *is.”* The humans would have him defend them. He can only presume the enclaves would as well. “So, to recap. The dementors have—declared war, for lack of a better term. Their goal is, what? To kill me? Have there been any attacks?”

“You have been kept in one of the most heavily warded castles on the globe,” Riddle says. “It would have been here, Persia, China, Egypt or Peru.”

“Or Japan,” he finds himself saying. “Considering.”

“I stand corrected,” Riddle says, eyes falling to half-mast. “Are we finally going to stop dancing around the topic? I admit the inference was beginning to annoy me.”

Itachi tries to roll his eyes, but the stress of the situation is making it difficult to be flippant about much. “I am not claiming any such role without explicit instructions. Instructions I had not received. I hadn’t gotten any visions, commandants or prophecies.”

“The Dragon Throne is claiming you are a reincarnated soul sent by the Father of Storms,” says Lord Potter. “If this is true, then an argument can be made that no further confirmation is needed.”

Easy for you to say. “Gods are not to be understood by mortal men,” he says sharply. “I am not claiming any supernatural authority until I am *certain* I will not be overstepping.” So, maybe the tone was a bit inappropriate for the faux casual conversation they were having. “My apologies,” he grits out. “If what you say is true—” Regulus sends him a firm nod. “—Then I will be relying on you, and others, to—Figure out a path forward. The point I’m trying to communicate is that I will be doing so as a fallible human with no claim on omniscience or supernatural wisdom.”

“But you are a reincarnate,” Lord Potter says. “I want to establish a baseline, first.”

“As far as we know, so are you,” Itachi says. “You simply don’t remember it.”

“But you do?”

Like a dog with a bone.

“He is a son of House Black,” says Grandfather. Itachi blinks at the steely tone. “He is Sirius Black, Heir of House Black, and my grandson. This is who he is.”

“But that’s not all he is.”

“I can’t see why that would matter.”

Lord Potter leans forward in his seat, planting his elbows on the table, expression resolute. “It matters because a child of eleven is not capable of the degree of autonomy that will be required of him if we let things be.”

Oh, Itachi thinks, some of the ice gathering behind his teeth cracking and melting away. He’s worried. He’s *protective.* Bless. He thought—He thought that he was worried about James.

“And how would you prevent it,” Riddle says, head tilted to the side. “I could not, even if I was inclined to try. All of us in this room could not. Don’t waste our time, Lord Potter.”

“Sirius, please,” Lord Potter says, ignoring him with aplomb, it has to be said. “I do not mean to trap you. I only want to know if we should be making body doubles.”

He tries to smile as gently as he can. The man is worried about you. “I was alive, before,” he says. “With that said, again, I do not claim any wisdom or insight. I was not privy to any great wisdom. I have no access to higher truths. My previous life was short, brutal and violent. There are no answers to be found there.”

Charlus sags a little with relief. “Thank the Lady,” he says, rubbing his temples. “Alright. Alright. I will not be sending an eleven-year-old to war.”

Hah.

“Not to worry, Lord Potter,” he says. “Last time around, I was a fully trained combatant and an enlisted soldier at seven, so that’s not—” He blinks. Everybody in the room is staring at him with varying degrees of shock. Well, everybody except Regulus. Regulus looks equal parts long-suffering and fond. “Different life,” he says. “And I said—brutal and violent. So, I suppose that what I *meant* to say is that I am well-prepared for warfare. On balance, going to a civilian school was more of a shock than—” He’s not helping his case.

“Again, I would point out that it doesn’t matter what Black is,” Riddle says. “What matters is what people believe he is. The Dragon Emperor made sure the rumour had spread even

before you went and killed twelve dementors in as many minutes. The ICW spiriting you away only confirmed things."

True. How is Riddle of all people the only reasonable person around?

"Foolish," says Lady Flamel, eyebrows arched. "You might not care, but Mister Black's healers must know. It was only through an abundance of caution that I hadn't extracted his eyes and implanted a new pair. To say nothing of the hand."

Itachi swallows down the instinctive aggression. She doesn't know what she is saying, he tries to console himself. If she knew what she was saying to a *Uchiha,* she never would have dared. It's fine.

"Nobody touches my eyes," he says, just in case. "And, to answer your question, I don't know. How would I know? I died in battle, before." A couple of times. "Then I was born. I assure you that nobody offered me a manual."

"But you know enough to be protective of your eyes," she says, fully unwilling to pay attention to her own safety.

"In my previous life, my species had—ocular abilities," he says, voice tight but polite enough. Judging by Riddle's visible interest, whatever he is picking up from Itachi is bloodthirsty enough to give a normal man pause. "We would probably have fit your definition of magical creatures." He cracks himself up sometimes, he really does. "How might a Veela react if you told them you plan to cut their wings off and attach a different pair? A *better* pair, even."

"Ah."

Itachi nods. Indeed, *Ah*.

“My apologies,” she says, after a pause. “I will make a note and adjust my methods. Any other limits?”

He tries to think about it. The wizards were a bit lax about sexual violence for his Shinobi roots, but the topic was hardly going to come up in this context. The only other big taboo he could think of was civilian-Shinobi relationships, and they have that plenty covered in these parts. “None that I can think of. The hand is—I feel no specific attachment to it, other than a subconscious awareness that it will become important in the future.”

“These ocular abilities,” says Riddle. “Would they manifest in some ways? With red, glowing eyes, perhaps?”

Itachi tries not to overreact. If he had lifted it from his mind—Doubtful, but—

“Your Patronus had red eyes,” Reg says, dispelling the mounting stress. “The more solid it became, the clearer it became.”

Okay. So— “It did, did it,” he says slowly. “Interesting. They had been red, yes. Red with black commas. You are certain—”

“You spun a miracle in the middle of a most watched court case in Europe, Sirius,” Grandfather says. “Thousands of images have been captured of the event. Tens of thousands.”

“Convenient,” he says, still lost in thought. That *would* explain some things. The odd double vision, for one. And the difference in perspective. “It’s possible the effect is mostly cosmetic. My abilities now have very little to do with what they had been. My eyes could have—” He tries to imagine having to explain the Sharingan to these flower children and hesitates. Lord Riddle, maybe, but—“It’s different,” he says after a brief pause. But—His head has been hurting a lot. And his eyes—

“Whatever is happening, it’s costly,” says Lord Flamel. “The ritual your brother insisted on was an unorthodox one, designed to treat a damaged magical core. One might think of it as a

transfusion of magic. Your system soaked it up like a sponge; I've never seen a humanoid absorb and spend magic at that rate."

Ah. "My body is forever catching up to the demands made of it, it seems," he says. "I am given to understand keeping me alive in my first years was a complicated affair as well."

"You performed accidental magic upon birth," Grandfather says. "They saved the mediwitch, in the end, but it was touch and go for a while."

Ouch.

"While this is all very fascinating," Riddle drawls, "I think we have rather strayed from the purpose of this meeting. Meaning you, Black, and how things are to proceed."

Bless. "I recover and train," he says and blinks. "And test out of Hogwarts, I suppose?"

"Hogwarts Castle is, at the moment, no longer a school," the Headmaster says. "But your point is understood. We can organise some sort of certification process—"

Some of his shock must be written on his face, because Reg hums a noise, and Riddle rolls his eyes.

"The Muggleborns had to be evacuated and given shelter behind old wards," Regulus says. "Muggleborns and any Half-bloods without ties to a Noble House."

Wow, okay. "That makes sense." Does it? He takes a look at the Headmaster. It was probably good for him, at that. He finally picked a side for good. Hold on. "Alps, you said," he says slowly. "The Veela, Harpies and Slyphs ran to the Alps."

The Headmaster rolls his shoulders in an uncomfortable gesture. "It *is* a well-warded castle," he says. "And, I suppose nobody can expect nonhumans to share in our condemnations."

Wow. “Good for them,” he says and means it. “You can find worse methods of protecting your interests than a Dark Lord with a grudge.”

“Be nice,” Regulus says, faux-sternly. “It was a big deal. Still is. The Alps were a crucial part of the muggle economy and Grindelwald is a war criminal.”

Uh-huh. “Oh no, a Dark Lord,” he says in his flattest voice. “How shocking. And what was that other thing? Muggle economy is suffering? Say it isn’t so. If there was any justice in the word, the Slyphs would have let themselves be eaten, rather than harm the muggles’ gross domestic product.”

“Merlin’s mercy, I thought all that political philosophy was a bad sign,” says Lord Potter. “Your Hit Wizard team warned me too, and I didn’t listen. The kid is a socialist, they said. He’s going to be *complicated* about this, they said. And did we listen?” He sighs, tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling. “The enclaves declared themselves independent nations. In a way, Hogwarts did the same; it was somewhat autonomous from its inception. The Ancient and Noble Houses raised their wards and function as de facto city-states. Whatever emerges from this mess will have little to do with what was there before.”

“A tragedy,” Itachi says. “Such a wealth of virtue will be lost.” Honestly. No wonder Lord Riddle has been in such a fine mood these days. This anarchy is right up his alley. No centralised government? City-states duking their disputes out on the battlefield? A suggestion of a bloody battle around every corner? This is his paradise, he’s pretty certain. “Now that we got that out of the way, have we given any thought about my handlers going forward? Because, let me tell you, I am nobody’s idea of a leader—”

Chapter End Notes

Is this the end?? It feels like the end?? Or very really near the end. Just a bit more to get everyone on the same page, like a series of little epilogues. But all my big revelations and loose ends are finally tied, Itachi is firmly no longer a kid that he’s not, his mentor is

no longer on a self-destructive path of insanity, the slavery is mostly abolished and capitalism has fallen. Yay.

In this world, Dementors don't eat muggles. Because of course they don't. If they could, they wouldn't bother with wizards at all. Foolishness.

I have no idea what the rule of capitalisation is in HP. It's driving me mad. Veela are capitalised, but dragons aren't. Dementor, Kneazle, Occamy, but banshee, fairy, elf.

I'm going to capitalise all of it, then. Fuck it.

Chapter 36

“Handlers, ‘Tachi?”

Itachi hesitates. That’s a proceed with caution tone. “I mean. Captains? Team leaders?” He blinks. “Sorry, I am going in blind, here.”

“You are not a weapon or a soldier,” Regulus says. “You are a person. A human. *My* human, to be more precise.” Itachi nods immediately. That’s a comfortable axiom. All three are. “I do not enjoy the dehumanising terminology.”

Is it dehumanising? In many ways, Itachi was treated with more care and respect in ANBU than he had anywhere since, Hogwarts included. But, okay, maybe it comes across as callous to Reggie. “My teammates, then,” he says. “I need a group of people I can trust to direct and instruct me. This is already a mess, and it’s going to need clever people to manage it.”

“Which disqualifies you—how?”

Itachi’s logical apparatus was satisfactory by anybody’s standards, even his own. That said, his social skills were and are dismal. Most importantly, his character disqualifies him from a leadership position. Itachi was a born and raised follower, twice over.

“We’re not going to get anywhere without a solid and reliable division of labour,” he says. “Moreover, there is no time for foolishness. We’re facing a threat we know very little about. Conversely, the enemy knows a lot about us. Our forces are scattered, there is no clear leadership structure—” Calm down, Uchiha. You’re distressing *yourself*. “I don’t want to privilege any one group ahead of another. I don’t even want to suggest it.”

Headmaster Dumbledore beams. *Beams*. Itachi blinks back, dazed. “Wow.” Honestly, Uchiha. “Sorry, that was—” What was that? “Did you want to add something, Headmaster?”

“Just my compliments, Heir Black. It is to your credit that you are willing to consider us all as allies in this struggle.”

He lets his forehead wrinkle like it wants to. “I mean, we are? The Dementors aren’t—” He pauses, trying to gather his thoughts. Just thinking about Kaguya makes dread settle in his stomach. “They’re not alive. They’re not *anything*. When I—I can hear their screams. The souls they—I can hear their anguish. It’s—” He blinks and inhales a calming breath. “They’re not beings like a parasite is a being. They’re evil and they’re consuming magic, and they must be stopped. All magical beings are united in this purpose.” And, if afterwards, the political structures are all smashed to smithereens, that will be a nice side-effect. A war against a common enemy unites people like nothing else. Itachi would not have *recommended* the magical beings rise up in bloody revolution, but capitalising on existing chaos is just good sense.

Reg’s eyes round, expression turning stricken. “You can hear it? Them?”

“It’s very disorienting,” he says, grimacing. “The artificial fear is, whatever, a crude illusion. My mother could cast better in her sleep.” Either one of his mothers, frankly. “But the howling anguish is challenging to ignore.”

“Troubling,” Riddle says. What is this? Since when is Riddle troubled about Itachi’s feelings? “Disorientation has no place on the battlefield.”

Ah. Good. Reasonable. “It will take some practice,” he agrees. “Our instructors, before, had developed training protocols for the psychological side of combat. Warriors would saturate their energy—a working equivalent to your magic—with killing intent, and we would build up immunity over time. I can’t see why that wouldn’t be appropriate for this situation.”

“In a pensieve?”

Itachi blinks at the Headmaster. A memory? “No? I can’t see how that would work.” Or—“Unless you have a special pensieve that lets you relive the effects of magical spells?” Huh. That *would* be useful. Like Tsukuyomi, maybe, only better because he could experience memories of other people, not inflict them. He turns to Riddle. “Do you? Like, the Cruciatus, say, could you—”

“Hecate wept, ‘Tachi,” Regulus says. “No, the Headmaster isn’t going to—No.”

Ah, well. It was a nice thought, but an artefact like that would probably come with a lot of ofter side effects. Tsukuyomi probably had as well, on reflection, it’s just that med-nin dealt with burst blood vessels, strokes and tumours. On the off-chance his victims survived long enough to develop symptoms, of course. Maybe Hound—Abort, abort. This is a gruesome line of thought and Riddle is smirking again.

“I hadn’t thought so,” he says, trying to tread lightly. “It’s why I asked Lord Riddle. But, in any case, it’s a poor substitute.” You can’t beat exposure therapy, you really can’t. Illusions were used to develop the plasticity of the mind, but you could never train a child out of the inborn fear response with illusions alone. Your subconscious knows illusions are fake on some level. The only thing you would end up with is a traumatised child who *still* would freeze at the wrong time. “No, what we’ll do is, we’ll go out and capture a couple of Dementors in a bubble and surround them with Patroni, and then I’ll—”

“We won’t do that either,” Regulus says, voice a little shrill. “Let’s—Okay, let’s pause on the —The training methodology. Let’s focus on the immediate future. Meaning the logistics.”

Huh. He’s upset. Does he—He must know that Itachi will be going out to fight the Dementors? Surely they’ve established that much. “Good plan, let’s do that. What will you be telling the public, for one?”

Grandfather’s sigh is comfortably back into fond territory, which is encouraging. “Regarding what? Your Avatar status is pretty well-known.”

“Right, right.” Civilians. Remember that you’re dealing with civilians, here. “I meant about the reincarnation bit. I’m pretty sure that whatever Walburga did was—nonsense. If I was placed here deliberately—” Which he, in his heart of hearts, always assumed was true. “—it wasn’t because of anything Walburga Black did. I don’t want the idea to take root.”

“You don’t look forward to the trend of babies sacrificed by their mothers while still in their wombs,” Riddle says in a light tone. “Shocking.” He flicks a hand at Lord Potter and Grandfather’s pale faces. “Either you are performing outrage or you are clinging to

ignorance. Neither is charming. In either case, your Takeda Lord made sure the rumours only claimed you as a reincarnate. Meaning a chosen prophet, imbued by the will of the Storm God, etcetera etcetera. Walburga is hardly mentioned at all."

"He is not *my* anything." Itachi has enough people to answer to already. Married Japanese Lords should be admired from afar. "But that's good. The first step, or something." He looks at Regulus. "We should—My role in this is clear, Reg. I am not a diplomat or a politician. We can try to manipulate rumours and tailor people's preconceptions, but it's going to come down to combat."

"And politics," Regulus says forcefully. "You cannot fight in every battle. You cannot be everywhere."

True. He also can't afford to split his attention.

"The Dragon Throne and Chrysanthemum Court have been sending aid," Regulus continues. "To Hogwarts but also to enclaves. Food, potion ingredients, things like that. Britain was hit badly, and we atomised more than most. Our food production is—It is done in your name. You—*We* have to keep that connection."

Uh-huh. "Sure, makes sense."

"Ancient and Noble Houses have been behaving, because word had spread about how House Black feels about them taking advantage of desperate Half-bloods. Light Houses did what they could, but we know Dark has more resources."

Itachi huffs and sends a bubble of endeared-exhausted-resigned at Riddle. Regulus knows that House Black couldn't match the influence the Dark Lord has on the Dark Purbloods. If they are playing ball, it's because Riddle is *here* instead of out there, profiting off of human misfortune.

"Absolutely."

“Along similar lines, *we* took in thousands of refugees. Gold is not a problem, but gold isn’t worth much. We are keeping them fed and strong enough to keep up our wards because of the supplies people have been sending you.”

Good grief.

“And, the enclaves don’t trust humans, but they do trust you—”

“I know, Reg,” he says quietly. “All that is important, but I must train. Time for classes and school has passed. Now it’s—” He shrugs. “I am quite good at battle, you know? Some people called me a genius. I will go where you tell me and make small talk with whoever you think is best, but the schedule of a battle-ready warrior is tight. I will only have so much time.”

The atmosphere in the room plummets. Itachi does his best to keep his irritation deeply buried. Civilians. They don’t live in the same world, nor would he want them to.

“It’s the only way,” he says, as gently as he can. “If the situation is as messy as it is, I can’t believe we only have Dementors to worry about. The nonhumans have taken their shot. Soon, so will the underground, if they haven’t started already. If I am, indeed, as valuable a resource as you all claim I am, then they will work hard to acquire me. I need to be prepared for those attempts as well.”

“You’re hardly going to go anywhere alone,” Reg says. “But—I know. Of course I know.”

No, you don’t, he thinks and takes stock of his audience. Grandfather and Lord Potter are talking behind a polite notice-me-not, papers strewn across their part of the table. The Headmaster is watching Regulus with genuine care. Well, he says care. A man is only heartbroken on behalf of children he cares about.

“That’s good,” he says instead of pressing the issue. He has no intention of hiding what a Shinobi-style training regiment looks like, but he need not rub it in his face. Things will become brutal soon enough. These wizards don’t fight with their bodies, possibly because their bodies are weak. Itachi’s left arm might well become a sword, once he sorts out how to

cast with the wand fused to his body. All he needs now is to pick up the slack and figure out how to adapt Taijutsu and Kenjutsu for magic. “We should probably talk to my badgers, sometime today.” He looks at Riddle who is studying him with some care. “My Hit Wizards are competent and dangerous. I think they will be helpful, combat-wise.”

“Prott was a gifted young man, from what I recall,” he says. “But Jun, Corvi and the not-Malfoy are the dangerous ones. Corvi especially.”

Hah. “I got that much, yeah,” he says.

“With that said, your most pressing task is to grow comfortable with magic and casting,” Riddle says. “Your style—If not for the claw, I would have suggested you give up on the wand as a focus altogether. It doesn’t suit you. Your erstwhile species hadn’t used foci, had they?”

And now they have the attention of the room again.

“No,” he says. “We fought with blades and our bodies. We blended our spiritual energy—magic—and our physical energy. It was sturdier and more practical, but far less flexible than what you do.”

“You are a wizard, now, little Black,” Riddle says, but he’s not displeased. If anything, he looks delighted. “Europe favours wanded combat, and the trend had started to catch in Asia in the last few centuries. Before, magic was—More like what you once used.”

Itachi nods. “I’ve read about it. It’s not—I can see why your foci and rituals came about. It’s far easier to reproduce. Our workings were different between users, even between individual castings. Inevitably, a lot of knowledge was lost between generations.” It’s why Uchiha were as successful as they were. They could see the patterns and recreate them with more or less success. It’s also why Uchiha were so short-lived and insane. So. Swings and roundabouts.

“I will think about it,” Riddle says. “But your magic is brittle, to say nothing about the inexplicable metamorphosis you still haven’t finished. For now, mastering yourself will be more valuable than any working you could learn.”

Hah. Mastering yourself. “That’s a nice concept,” he says. “If only the self I need to master wouldn’t keep changing from year to year.”

“Spare me the melodrama, brat. I am here, drowning in the hyper-emotionality of your hoard, because you must be kept alive. I will not accept whining about a priceless, unique skill literally handed to you by the Gods.”

Chapter 37

It's been six hours and some. They gathered for this meeting six hours ago. The Flamels summoned food and they meeting-ed right through it. Working lunch, he's heard Timothy say, typically when he was mocking Itachi. Or was it Garnall?

He can't allow six to become seven. He must not. There are things to do. He could be meditating. He could be sleeping. Anything that isn't—

What are they even talking about? He's almost vibrating in place with how much he doesn't want to be here, anymore. It's good that he finally has some answers and a concrete idea about what's going on. The feeling of relief faded three hours ago. Two hours ago he realised that he was getting a grim peek into his immediate future. Civilians and word-play and justifying things that need to be done who object to them because of principles they wouldn't hold if they knew how combat worked.

Just before the clock on the wall ticks to four-thirty—his seven-hour mark—he finally manages to say the right combination of words that will let him escape *and* escape alone. Reg is having the time of his life, the eldritch creature, talking fiscal politics between city-states with the Headmaster, Lord Potter and Lord Black. Riddle has been snarling insults back and forth with Lady and Lord Flamel. Itachi is wholly unnecessary here.

He says something, doesn't matter what, but the important thing is that Reggie lets him go with a fond smile and a dismissive flick of the hand. Perfect. Now—

"Not so fast, baby Black," Riddle croons, while he's making his hurried goodbyes. "Your hand."

Nobody's idiot, Itachi thrusts out a hand without a word.

"Your survival stratagems need updating," Riddle says under his breath. Overkill, what with the privacy bubble he's thrown around them already. "Did they not teach your species about giving their hands to Dark Lords?"

Dramatic. Itachi might be bad with people, but Riddle is barely a person. In a lot of ways, he and Cousin Bella were the easiest humans to understand. Riddle was dangerous before, when he didn't have a convenient war to fight and was looking to start one. Now? He's at his most useful and will remain such until the time comes to make peace. "They taught me to give my hand to every bad man I see so I could kill them in whatever lair they like to take little boys to." He makes sure his blink is slow and deliberate; a show of unconcern. "If I was paid enough, of course. Paedophile rapists cost extra."

"Touchy," murmurs Riddle, wand circling his wrist. "A shame that it takes such an overwhelming amount of tedium to get you to stop playing the rabbit." The working is costly, whatever it is. The hairs on his wrist are standing on their ends.

"And the day is still young." He closes his eyes and exhales. No. Wrong. Wrong mindset and wrong thoughts. "First time around, the medics managed my puberty," he grits out. "I had a whole team."

"You being alive is a medical impossibility," Riddle says. "The more healers you introduce, the more likely it is that your body realizes this fact and disintegrates."

Joy.

"Trust that the last thing I want is a hormonal Black. The last thing *anyone* wants, frankly, but mainly me. If I am resigned, so should you be."

The plan was to go talk to James, after the meeting. Instead, he goes to find Garnall.

"Baby Black—Woah. Alright. Did someone—Is there a pulped corpse or six we need to clean up?"

Itachi arranges his face in a tense smile. “Meeting,” he says. “About policy. And, apparently, I’m finally healthy enough to start puberty. It’s a lot.”

“Wow.” Garnall takes some time to look him up and down. That’s fine; Itachi is looking over them just as much. Lady Corvi earned another scar across her throat. He tries not to think about it being collar-shaped. What have they been doing, and against whom have they been doing it? Juanjun’s smile is that much softer, as if to balance the black shell of magic surrounding him like the exoskeleton of a beetle. “I’d offer a trip to the training rooms but A. Taking you anywhere without your handlers’ say-so will get me skinned and tanned, and B. You just got out of a two-week solo stay after having your hand cut off. So, how about I get you a cup of cocoa?”

“I had cocoa,” he says. I *want* to spend time away from civilians who—“ Who what? “If my family had their say, we’d fight this war with trade agreements, alliances and corporate sabotage.” Reg had sincerely argued that Itachi shouldn’t train more than two hours a day, and fight two times a week. He knew how nutty the suggestion was, of course, but that was his starting position.

Garnall makes a sound in the back of his throat. “That’s how it be. People in charge are rarely military. They don’t know—Or they don’t want to. That would be—” He jerks his shoulders in a shrug. “Complicated, I guess. At least in your case, it comes from a place of care.”

Yes, well.

“Come,” says Lady Corvi. “We have a set of rooms nearby. Who is your watcher?”

Hah. He jingles his wrist. “Tracking bracelets,” he says. “If my vitals spike, Fawkes will bring Lord Riddle.”

“Well, that’s the most terrifying thing I’ve heard all week,” says Garnall. “Now *I* need a cup of cocoa. Come on, then. Lali’s right on the gold with this one.”

Garnall and his team are visibly more at home here, he thinks, taking a moment to look over the room from his defensible position in the arm-chair in the corner. They would, considering they're not on a bodyguarding mission in a school. He appreciates the atmosphere. ANBU barracks looked nothing like these beautiful, ornate rooms, but the feel is the same, with weapons and texts covering every flat surface and bits and pieces of body armour strewn around the chairs, shelves and floor.

"How's the hand?"

Itachi looks at Garnall. *Looks*-looks. He appears more or less the same. Maybe a bit more exhausted and less stiff, but the thin film of composure stretched over a mountain of tension is there. He wonders vaguely where the rest of his team is. Only three of them are here, after all. That strikes him as odd.

He shrugs. "I've been doing some basic training to get used to the difference in shape and weight. Other than that, it's about what you would expect."

Garnall's laugh is—complicated. "I didn't have any solid expectations about watching a kid get casually mutilated while he's talking political ethics with a Dark Lord."

Alright. "It was hardly mutilation," he says cautiously. "Also, why did you watch? I thought it was for—Healers. The audience, I mean."

Garnall grows quiet. Solemn. "Sorry. I was—It was an open audience, and I was here, so—Sorry. Lali wiped the floor with me afterwards, as punishment for invading your privacy, if it makes it any better."

Itachi will never understand these people. "I don't care," he says and means it. "I was just wondering. You don't like watching children in pain, but you watched the surgery of a child." Sort of a child.

"If I knew how to take care of myself, kid, I wouldn't be where I am."

True. He shrugs, lips curving into a smile. That's familiar. "It was surgery," he says. "Clean pain with a purpose. Lord Riddle was there to distract me. It was fine."

Garnall closes his eyes briefly, releasing the tension in his shoulders with visible effort. "So —About everything that's happened—"

Dull. "Walburga Black didn't summon me from purgatory," he says and adds, "But I was alive, before. In a different world, of a different species."

"No shit?"

Itachi makes a neutral noise in his throat, wondering a little at the strange turn his life has gone in. The war and Itachi's role in it made it very convenient to be a reincarnate. Nobody, it seems, could have stomached a child in battle. If given half an excuse they will take the idea of an adult in a child's body and run with it. In a way, the war was the best thing that could have happened to him, if the goal was to live as honest a life as was possible. Funny, that.

"What was it like?"

Hah.

"You wouldn't have liked it," he says. "I didn't like it, and I didn't have anything to compare it to."

Garnall sighs again, multi-layered and complicated. "Yeah, I thought that might have been the case. You're such a fucked up kid. Man, whatever."

Is he a man now? He doesn't feel like a child, but he hadn't felt like one when he was one. In any case. "That's certainly true. My first body was considerably less sane, though." Can a body be sane? Can a soul be *in*sane?

“Wow. That’s—” Garnall opens his eyes and stares at him. If Itachi wasn’t who he was, he might have been upset by the piercing, revealing nature of the stare. As it is, he doesn’t feel much about it at all. Go ahead and look. I guarantee you won’t make sense of anything you see. “The problem is, I don’t know if it’s possible to have an adult in a kid’s body. I look at you and I see a kid. A kid that—” He swallows. “That the whole world wants.”

Ah. So that’s what he’s been doing. Makes sense. Garnall and his team have a head start, so to speak. “I was a fully certified mercenary killer at seven, the first time around. Applying your moral norms to me is not the best use of your time and energy.”

“Yeah?” Garnall’s expression twists, lips pressed into a tight, unhappy line. “I believe in reincarnation, you know? Always have. It’s not an outlandish thought, considering all the soul magic out there.”

Itachi cocks his head. “Alright?”

“So, the only thing that’s different about you, is that you remember one life. Out of presumably, millions. Billions, whatever. That doesn’t make you any less of a human. A twelve-year-old human with fucked up memories and a shitty set of expectations connected with them”

Only Itachi *doesn’t* believe in reincarnation, as absurd as it may sound. And—He wouldn’t have started this topic in a million years, but—

“My family—” He starts, eyes finding Garnall’s. “Do you—It’s a bit of a story.”

“Kid, we’re on our mandatory downtime. Healers’ orders. If I’m not here with you I’m out there picking dumb fights with people who can smear my body into the ground.”

Fair enough.

“My family was sworn to the Three Precious Children: the sun goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami, the moon deity Tsukuyomi-no-Mikoto, and the storm god Susanō-no-Mikoto. It was—a big deal. For us.” A bigger deal than he knows how to explain. The wizards were casual, cultural believers. Shinobi who made it into middle age were superstitious, paranoid lunatics who had as many rituals as their lives could support. “Do you know the story about Susanō-no-Mikoto?”

“Japanese deity,” Garnall says. His focus is encouraging. He wants to listen. “Of wind and sea, storms and love.”

“He was exiled from the Heavens,” he says. “Our teachings say—Storms are unpredictable and capricious. A god of storms cannot be any other way. There is a line, however. He caused great harm and distress to His family, his sister, Amaterasu Ōmikami. As a result, he was cast down, thrown out of the Heavens.” His voice is even, interestingly. He wouldn’t have thought it would be. “Uchiha worship him because He is a god of the fallen. Those who have to learn to be good with trial and error. We—” Not we. “*They—”* Never mind what they did or didn’t do. “When I died—There is a working. It can tear a soul from the beyond, and bind it to a sacrifice. After that, you don’t go back. You get one shot at the beyond, and if—” Did it happen to everybody else that was called? Did it happen to—But, no. They never found Shisui’s body. Itachi made sure of that. And his family was burned, as was appropriate. “Walburga Black thought she had the power to bind a soul cast out of the Summerlands. That was not true. A god—A god could have. A god could have taken one of the damned souls sworn to Him and—”

“What are you doing to yourself *now?”*

Itachi blinks up with hazy eyes struggling to focus. Who— “Marvolo?”

An irritated sigh. “Not an hour. Not a damn hour—I will start keeping you in stasis, do you know?”

That sounds nice. Restful.

“You astound me. Stop focusing all the magic you don’t have into your eyes, brat.”

“I might have the Sharingan,” he says, while they’re on the topic of eyes. “Cursed eyes. I hope not. People with Sharingan have a long tradition of kin-slaying.” He huffs, eyes prickling. “Covered that early, this time.”

“Fawkes, if you don’t mind?”

The bursts of sound knocks him out two notes in. Rest.

“So, that was embarrassing,” he says when he wakes up. After the initial disorientation passed and his internal clock clicked back on, he figured he had a nice nap, maybe half an hour long.

Riddle’s eyes flick up from his book and look away in the next breath. “Liar.”

Itachi shrugs. “Seems like a thing to say.” He’s not embarrassed. This ranks low on the list of recent indignities. “Did I traumatise my Hit Wizards?”

“Probably.”

Wonderful. He sighs and bends back into a stretch. The prosthetic plays oddly with the muscles in his left arm, he’s found. They’re coming in differently than on the right.

“On the bright side, your timing is excellent,” Riddle says. “I doubt anybody will try to force you to sit through eight hours of meetings again. Or until you dig out a healer from underneath some rock to proclaim you stable.”

Hah.

“Doubtful.”

“I impressed on them the likelihood of me being willing and able to hold your hand, day in and day out.”

If not Riddle, they will find another empath.

“I will be healthy enough for mood-stabilising potions sooner or later,” he says, shrugging.

“Not until your body finally transforms into whatever it wants to become you won’t.”

Hah. “Funny,” he says, amused. “Does that mean they won’t have me fighting until then, too?”

Riddle’s lips curve into a smile. He turns a page. “I doubt it. They will wring their hands for a couple of days. A week at most. Then the Dementors will eat a village of gnomes somewhere in South America and they will allow themselves to be convinced.”

“Civilians,” he says, fond. “I never had civilians in my direct line of leadership. In civilian matters, yeah, but we were a military dictatorship. This is very strange.”

“In all fairness, they’re as scared of you as you are of them.” Riddle turns another page. “Do you think you are capable of not killing yourself for the rest of the day?”

Itachi considers this. “I could go back to sleep,” he offers.

“Do so.”

He should—There are so many things to do. So many people to talk to, and loose ends to cauterise. James and his badgers are—And his immediate family—Regulus is fucking around with time turners, he's certain of it, and he hasn't seen a hair of Kreacher since he woke up. And the war, of course, is going to be exhausting. But—

"Sleep, brat."

He will get around to it. Tomorrow.

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